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Primo Levi

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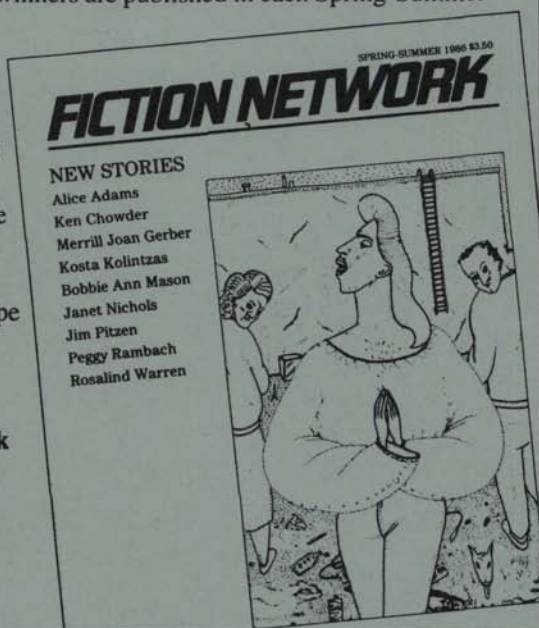
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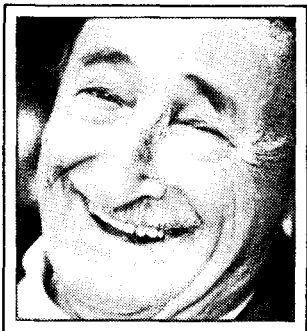
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Risa Sodi

AN INTERVIEW WITH PRIMO LEVI

RS: A recent book by the historian H. Stuart Hughes profiles six Italian Jewish writers, you among them.¹ Does it seem a bit strained to you to call all six of you “Jewish writers?”

PL: Yes, in Italy, it is quite difficult to apply a label such as “Jewish writer” or “non-Jewish writer.” In my case, it was the Americans, not the Italians, who first used it. In Italy, I’m known as a writer who is occasionally Jewish. Not in America. The last time I was in America, in 1985, it was as if they had pinned the Magen David on me again! Nonetheless, I don’t mind. As far as I’m concerned, it’s fairly easy to define me as a Jew because almost all of my books deal with Judaism in one way or another and also because I had the adventure of Auschwitz by dint of being a Jew. Certainly, for a writer like Moravia, for Svevo, or also for Ginzburg, it’s extremely difficult to speak of Jewish writers. If Ginzburg weren’t a Jew, it would hardly change anything in her books. Bassani, however, is another matter. In fact I remember Hughes calls him “the only real Jew” or “the first real Jew”—I don’t quite remember the phrase he uses. As far as I’m concerned, my science fiction books have almost nothing to do with Judaism, and *The Monkey’s Wrench* is not a “Jewish book” either. All the same, I gladly accept the label “Jewish writer.”

RS: At the beginning of *I sommersi e i salvati*, you quote from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns;
And till my ghastly tale is told
This heart within me burns.

vv. 582–85

After reading that, I wondered, is it ever possible to stop “telling?”

PL: You read the answer in that same book. Some of my friends,

1. H. Stuart Hughes, *Prisoners of Hope: The Silver Age of the Italian Jews, 1924–1974* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1983). The six authors profiled are Italo Svevo, Alberto Moravia, Giorgio Bassani, Natalia Ginzburg, Carlo Levi and Primo Levi.

dear friends at that, never speak of Auschwitz at all. Others talk about it incessantly, and I'm one of them. I exaggerated a bit when I quoted Coleridge. My heart isn't constantly burning. Many years have passed and, above all, I've written many books on the subject, I've given a huge number of talks in schools and at conferences, and I've talked with a tremendous amount of people. All this has built up a sort of diaphragm, a barrier, so you can say I was really a bit rhetorical in quoting Coleridge.

RS: It's a beautiful passage!

PL: I know! I was struck by it when I first read it. I was struck by this fact in particular: if you remember the scene of the Ancient Mariner, he grabs the wedding guests, who pay him no heed—they have the wedding on their minds—and forces them to listen to his tale. Well, when I had just come back from the camp, I acted in the same way. I had an impelling need to tell this story to whomever at all! I had just gotten a job as a chemist in a little paint factory near Turin, and the workers there considered me something of a harmless kook because I did the exact same thing: I told my story to anyone and everyone, at the drop of a hat, from the plant manager to the yardman, even if they had other things to do—just like the Ancient Mariner. And then I would type into the night (because I also lived in the factory). I typed every night, and this was considered even crazier!

RS: And what was their reaction to your story?

PL: It was . . . correct. I don't know. They listened, some were even very interested.

RS: Did you tell your story in spite of yourself or with the precise idea that you had to tell it?

PL: I really needed to tell it. Now, if you ask me *why* I needed to tell it, I'd have a hard time answering you. But I had the feeling that I think Catholics must have when they go to confession: it's a great relief to confess. Or the feeling you have if you're in therapy with a psychoanalyst and by telling your story, you break free of it. But there's more to it than that. A very intelligent friend of mine once said to me, "That period was in Technicolor and the rest of your life has been in black and white." And that's pretty close to the truth. For example, it's true (and I wrote this in *I sommersi e i salvati*) that my memory of my imprisonment is much sharper and more detailed than anything before or since. For example, I remember that a few times, even recently, I have run into former prisonmates and, even though I hadn't seen them in forty years, I have been able to

recognize them immediately. It happened to me in Israel. I went there knowing that a former prisonmate would meet me at my hotel. Even with all the bustle of people coming and going in the lobby, I picked him out right away. And it even happened to me recently in England. I was there for the publication of *Survival in Auschwitz*.² Shortly beforehand, I had received a letter from Bristol, from a family that had read a brief story about a certain Goldbaum in *The Periodic Table*. They asked me if the person in the book could have been a relative of theirs. I answered that I would be in England soon if they wanted to see me, and so we met. They had a picture of this Goldbaum with them—taken before he was captured, obviously, in 1940. But I recognized him immediately. In fact, it was a shock seeing that photograph, it was really like a blow to the stomach.

RS: It's ironic that the most painful moment of your life has also been the most incisive.

PL: There's no contradiction there, don't you think? It was painful, certainly, but also—and it seems cynical to say so—it was also the most interesting period of my life. It was an adventure too. I'm not the only one who talks like this. As I mentioned, I have many friends here in Italy, Jews and non-Jews, Jewish deportees and non-Jewish deportees. A non-Jewish friend of mine was deported as a partisan when she was only seventeen. She lived her imprisonment at Ravensbrück much as I live mine at Auschwitz. Like me, she conducts a perfectly normal life now. But she also has a selective memory, and that's because she *grew up* in Ravensbrück. At seventeen, when she first passed through the concentration camp gates, she was just a young country school teacher. At Ravensbrück, she learned French and German; she learned how to live in a collectivity; she learned everything there. She says, "Ravensbrück was my university."

RS: You say something similar.

PL: Yes, I grew up at Auschwitz. I don't know if it's a virtue, or fortune or something else, but I truly accumulated an enormous amount of material, of notions, of considerations that I have yet to fully sort out.

RS: Were you a reflective person even before going to Auschwitz?

PL: Yes, I was pretty reflective before—in my own way! I was a

2. *Survival in Auschwitz* was translated in England under the title *If This Is A Man*?. The original title is *Se questo è un uomo*?

chemist. A chemist has to be thoughtful or else he's a bad chemist!

RS: I also get the feeling that you're a bit hostile towards psychoanalysis.

PL: In fact, I am! A friend of mine who was arrested with me is now a psychoanalyst in Milan. She wrote me a beautiful letter saying that she liked this book but that her professional conscience didn't. Now, I have to confess that I didn't think much of Bruno Bettelheim's first book.³ It seems to me that his interpretation of imprisonment as regression just isn't valid in general. It's valid for some but for others, like me, it was the exact opposite. So to hold up this theory as a general rule strikes me as unfair. But, more generally speaking, I've read Freud's works and I even like them a lot. He is a great writer and a great poet as well. A man of extraordinary acumen. But the psychoanalysts today leave me cold. They're schematic. Mind you: I'm not a psychotic myself and I've never had any direct experience!

RS: You also mention Liliana Cavani's film *The Night Porter* in *I sommersi e i salvati*.

PL: Yes, haven't you seen it?

RS: Yes, I saw it, but I had to walk out halfway through.

PL: Really?

RS: It was almost an affront. I couldn't sit through it because of the anger I felt.

PL: Yes, but unfortunately, it's not a bad movie. It's very well made. And Cavani isn't stupid. I know her personally.

RS: You've said that *The Night Porter* is "beautiful and false."

PL: Yes, it's beautiful from a technical point of view. And it has some good actors. But it's profoundly false.

RS: Why do you say false?

PL: Most of all because the relationship between the girl and the SS officer is false. Not that these things couldn't have happened. They could even have happened, but they were extremely marginal. The SS had nothing to do with the Lagers. Really, this avalanche of films that has been made. . . . Cavani's has a certain artistic dignity, but many of them are just trash. A lot of them make it seem as if the concentration camps were sexual gymnasiums where prostitution was the order of the day. I'll grant you that there was prostitution. Him-

3. Bruno Bettelheim, *Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations* (Bobbs-Merrill: Indianapolis, 1943).

mler himself decided at a certain point (I think in '42) that each Lager should have a brothel. He had two reasons: first of all, he was a moralist, he knew there was homosexuality in the camps, and so he said, "Let's provide them with women so that the men will go with women instead of with other men." In any case, he didn't have the Jews in mind (who had no need of women anyway). No, he was thinking of the political prisoners and the German criminals. He held it was, well, logical, that they have this brutish outlet. I learned much later that there was even a brothel in my camp, but it was "staffed" with non-Jewish women.

Now, the heap of lies that has been built up around this absurd topic is overwhelming. First of all, the prostitutes were well off and, second of all, they were professionals. They were mostly professional prostitutes who were arrested as such and plied their trade in the camps . . . and they were envied by all. I know of a Jewish girl who was able to pass as Aryan in order to work as a prostitute. That way, she ate a little more (they were paid in kind), and the clients who, as I said, were well-fed—being political prisoners and common criminals—paid her with butter, oil, bread, sweets and even stockings. There was another reason to encourage prostitution: obviously in those circumstances, the prostitutes and their clients formed deeply emotional bonds, and the clients in particular felt strong ties to these women. They confided their secrets to them—and many of the prostitutes were Gestapo agents.

So the motives involved in camp prostitution were very complex. The cliché of the innocent woman forced to be a "Soldatenhure" (a "soldiers' whore"), condemned to prostitute herself against her will, is absolutely false. It was a different thing altogether. I remember clearly, even after all this time, seeing the SS promenade through the paths of the camp, arm in arm with the prostitutes on Sunday afternoons. The prostitutes were not only their friends, they were often their colleagues.

RS: Your comments remind me of the passage by Italo Svevo that you quote in this book, "When you are near death, death is the last thing on your mind. Your entire being is dedicated to just breathing."⁴

4. "Quando si muore si ha ben altro da fare che pensare alla morte. Tutto il suo organismo era dedicato alla respirazione." Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* (Einaudi: Turin, 1965).

PL: No, for common prisoners like me, sex wasn't a problem. It was completely forgotten, even in our dreams.

RS: What do you think of theories that define the Jews as a racial entity?

PL: The question of race is just plain foolishness, pure unreality. Geneticists are seriously exploring the matter now. As a matter of fact, there was a conference on genetic blood-typing just yesterday in Turin. Apparently, there's a method of analyzing blood that gives a window onto the genetic subdivision of the human species, and the results show that the Jews don't belong to any one subdivision. They are a religious and/or cultural unity. But racial? Certainly not. A Yemenite Jew has nothing in common "racially" with a Russian Jew, at least half of whom are Ukranian converts.

RS: Anthropologists say that, genetically, Yemenite Jews resemble Yemenites more than they do Jews from other countries.

PL: But of course. How complicated is the history of the Jews! How many Jews have converted to Catholicism? And how many non-Jews have converted to Judaism? Aside from the Khasars, there's the story of the French duchy whose duke converted to Judaism around the year 1000, I believe, and brought all his subjects with him. And those weren't the only two cases in history. All during the Middle Ages in many parts of the Mediterranean basin, Jews had a certain prestige and made converts.

RS: In any case, do you consider yourself a member of the Jewish race or the Jewish culture?

PL: I have never bothered myself with questions of racial belonging.

RS: On what then, do you base this fact of "feeling Jewish?"

PL: It's a cultural fact. I can't say that Judaism has been my Pole star. I'm also a chemist and also a writer: there are a lot of things that interest me and Judaism is just one of them. I've been led a bit too, "channeled" I'd say, by my own books. *Survival in Auschwitz* was read as a book written by a Jewish author—especially abroad, much more than in Italy—and by dint of being called a Jewish writer, I became one! I've already mentioned that I began to wonder if any goyim lived in America. I didn't come across a single one of them! It almost becomes comical. My editor is Jewish, and all his collaborators are Jewish. He introduced me exclusively to illustrious American Jews. I spoke to Jewish audiences. And not just in New York, but everywhere I went. My wife and I began to wonder, where are the others?

RS: Perhaps you were invited to speak to Jewish groups because

there's no great interest in remembering the Holocaust outside of the Jewish community.

PL: Perhaps. Interest brings along with it guilt feelings.

RS: I was struck by the letters that the Germans readers of *Survival in Auschwitz* wrote to you after the book was translated into German. Many of those letter-writers mentioned the episode of the German guard who wiped his hands on your shirt. Why did that episode in particular strike the Germans?

PL: It was a highly symbolic act and that's why it strikes people—even me. It wasn't a painful act: a blow to the face would have been much more painful. But the fact was that he used me as a dirty rag. Then, and even now, I perceive that as one of the biggest insults I suffered.

RS: What weight did these offenses to your dignity carry?

PL: Well, at the beginning they carried some weight because it was before worse things were to happen. It was a sort of prologue. Then, clearly, we got used to it. They became routine.

RS: What does it mean, morally and spiritually, "to get used to it?"

PL: Simply put, one loses one's humanity. Inurement to life in the camp is the only way to survive, but it also robs you of a part of your humanity. It effects both prisoners and guards. Neither group was more human than the other. With precious few exceptions, the inhumanity of the Nazi system trickled down to even the prisoners.

RS: How does one reacquire one's humanity?

PL: Do you recall the last few pages of *Survival in Auschwitz*? In it I wrote about how I reacquired a feeling of humanity when a campmate and I were able to help the sick and dying, even though we were sick ourselves. I've maintained a fast friendship with Charles, a Frenchman who helped me; we still write to each other. I've been to see him twice, even though he lives in a remote and hard-to-reach area of France. Our friendship has survived because both he and I had the impression that we were sharing an important adventure: trying to save human lives. Our imprisonment had just ended (though we were still in Auschwitz). We were still deathly ill, but we put together a stove, cooked for ten people, and tried to help them survive just a little longer. We truly had the impression that we were reacquiring our dignity by helping others. And the others felt it too. Those poor sick men, some of them on the brink of death, gave us the extra slices of bread that they couldn't eat. This too was a human act, different from what had gone on before.

RS: Were you always sure you'd survive?

PL: Well, no. No, that was a changeable thing. It varied from day to day. In general, no. Of course I didn't think I'd survive. We all lived in a very unstable state of mind. All it took was one piece of news, one false item. Someone said, "The English have landed in Greece!" and that wasn't true, or "The Polish partisans are right outside the barbed wire!" and it wasn't true either. All it took was something like that to create a wave of optimism . . . and then it all collapsed.

RS: There was a part of your book that I found very disturbing, and that's the concept of useful and useless violence. Can there really be such a thing as *useful* violence?

PL: I know this is a difficult argument to explain. I had the impression at Auschwitz that there were two different levels of cruelty. For example, in *I sommersi e i salvati*, I've written that Raskolnikov's crime, where he kills the old usurer so he won't have to pay his debt, is not a useless crime. He doesn't want suffering or death for the old woman; he wants money and murder is his means. By the same token, Aldo Moro was killed in Italy. The Red Brigades didn't want to kill someone or inflict suffering on him or his family: they had a political plan. Instead, many of the Nazis' actions reflect nothing but the desire to inflict suffering for the purpose of inflicting suffering—and nothing more. I've mentioned one example, a clamorous example, of the ninety-year-olds in the Jewish nursing home in Venice who were loaded onto trains and taken away to the camps. Wouldn't it have been much more logical to kill them on the spot? I don't know if my interpretation of this event is right, but I see it as a scheme to inflict the maximum possible suffering on them—or else pure stupidity. When an order reads "alle," everyone, then everyone must be deported. The Nazis took their orders literally and deported everyone. Yes, it's a German characteristic to take orders literally, but as I've said, the Germans weren't made from a different mold than we were. Nothing would have happened to them if they had killed the moribund women on the spot. The guards wouldn't have been punished. But I think they derived a malicious pleasure from deporting them. Since they had been fed an intense propaganda campaign, according to which Jews were nothing more than "Ungeziefer," harmful animals—vermin, really—we were treated like vermin, like hateful people. There were many who truly hated us and considered it just to make us suffer. There's an episode in *The Divine Comedy* in which Dante inflicts suffering on one of the damned (I believe it's Bocca degli Abbati).⁵ The condemned man

5. Actually, the character was Fra Alberigo.

lies in a gelid lake, his eyes frozen over with ice so thick he can't even weep for his sins. This soul begs Dante, "I'll tell you my story if only you'll remove the ice from my eyes." Dante has him tell his story and then reneges on his promise, commenting:

I oped them not.
Rudeness was courtesy to such as he.⁶

In other words, it was Dante's duty to be cruel to him. I think something similar happened in Germany. The feeling that Dante, a fervent Catholic, felt toward the damned, who have no further claim to their rights and who must be forced to suffer, was perhaps the Nazis' position with regard to the Jews: they felt they must be forced to endure the maximum possible suffering.⁷

RS: Towards the end of the book, you recount an episode you also included in *Survival in Auschwitz*, the story of Elias the dwarf. After being goaded by Elias (the only man, you say, who actually enjoyed life in the camp), you got into a fistfight—the only attempt in your life to “render a blow for a blow.” No match for your tenacious and muscular adversary, Elias pinned you down by the throat, only to let you go when he saw the first signs of approaching unconsciousness. In *I sommersi e i salvati*, you use this story to introduce your thoughts on justice and who should render justice, and your conclusion is that justice should be left to the “professionals.”

PL: Only because I don't feel I'm capable. Then again, in our civilization, revenge is not allowed, and rightly so.

RS: And yet the desire for revenge is very common.

PL: Yes, the desire for revenge is very common, but to exact revenge is illegal. Now, because of an intrinsic weakness of mine or because of a gap in my upbringing, I'm not capable of acting like Jean Améry.⁸ Améry says that, under cover of a bombing raid, he punched

6. E io non lil' apersi/e cortesia fu lui esser villano. (*Inferno* XXXIII, v. 149–150), translation by Thomas William Parsons.

7. In *I sommersi e i salvati*, Levi calls this attitude “Schadenfreude,” “the joy one feels when harm is done a fellow man, nothing less than the joy of deliberately making one's fellow man suffer” (Einaudi: Turin, 1986; p. 85).

8. Jean Améry, né Hans Meyer, was a German philologist and philosopher, and a thoroughly assimilated Jew. He was tortured by the Gestapo for belonging to the Belgian resistance and then deported to Auschwitz as a Jew, where for a time, Améry and Levi were confined to the same barracks. In 1978, Améry committed suicide. “The Intellectual at Auschwitz,” a chapter of *I sommersi e i salvati*, considers Améry's story in more detail.

a Polish prisoner. Later, he was beaten quite badly because of it, but that was part of his moral code, the “Zurückschlagen,” to render a blow for a blow. I’ve hinted that Améry probably sentenced himself to death with his “Zurückschlagen” because he was an extremely polemical man. He was polemical with everyone, including me. I didn’t mention this in *I sommersi e i salvati*, but some of the letters he wrote to a mutual friend of ours were harshly critical of my stand vis-à-vis the Germans. He considered me a “forgiver,” a “Verzeihende.” He wrote a letter saying, “I don’t agree with Primo Levi, who tends to forgive everyone a little.” That isn’t true.

RS: However, in *I sommersi e i salvati* you said that on an individual level, you might even be able to forgive.

PL: I’m not exactly sure. Since I’m not a believer, I don’t really know what forgiveness is. It’s a concept that’s outside my world. I don’t have the authority to bestow forgiveness. If I were a rabbi, maybe I would; if I were a judge, perhaps. I believe that if someone has committed a crime, he has to pay. It’s not up to me to say, “I exempt you from punishment.” The authority does not rest with me.

RS: Do you say so out of anger?

PL: I don’t think so, because even when incidents don’t involve me directly, like the Italian terrorists, for example, or even with the repented terrorists, I can’t bring myself to forgive them. If they committed a crime, then they have to pay because justice doesn’t exist if there’s no payment. In *I sommersi e i salvati*, I mentioned the story of the onion—do you remember Dostoevsky’s story of the onion? In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Grušenka tells the story of a hateful old crone who, once in her life, gave a little onion to a beggar. After she dies and goes to Hell, an angel comes down and reaches out to her with a little onion in his hand. She hangs on to it and is thus delivered from Hell. That’s a very poetic story, but indefensible. One little onion is not enough. Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz: think of how many little onions he gave away—to his wife, his children, his dog, his horse! He was full of little onions!

RS: When you talk about this need you had, this need to bear witness, you say that the inmates in the Lager who were in a position to have information—the political prisoners—wrote their memoirs as an act of war.

PL: Yes, some certainly did. One of them, Langbein, is a dear friend of mine, a person I highly respect.⁹ At that time, he was a

9. See Hermann Langbein, *Die Starkeren: ein Bericht aus Auschwitz und anderen* (Bund-Verlag: Köln, 1982).

communist, but he left the party later during the Hungarian uprising. For him, and for many like him, bearing witness to the camps was truly a part of their political battle—the same spirit that was reflected in the Warsaw ghetto historians. Emanuel Ringelblum's diary was not an end unto itself: obviously it was also a political act.¹⁰ One of the ways of combatting Nazism was to denounce its crimes.

RS: Was your writing also a political act?

PL: Yes, of course . . . among other things. First of all, as I've already said—and honestly must say so—writing was a liberating act. I had these things inside of me and I had to get them out. But at the same time, it was also very political.

RS: Is that still true today?

PL: This book is a political book—in its own way. It's a moral book.

RS: Especially since you try to draw parallels between today's moral dilemmas and yesterday's.

PL: Yes.

RS: What do you think of the Waldheim affair?

PL: I think the American Jews made a mistake because the uproar they caused only played into his hands. I agree with Wiesenthal: in these matters, you have to have the proof at hand. First gather the proof, then make accusations.

RS: It seems that they have the proof.

PL: It seems so, but they're not willing to come forward with it. The Yugoslavs also have proof, but for their own reasons, they're not revealing it either. It was surely a strategic error to threaten to produce convincing evidence and then not release it. I don't think that Waldheim is technically a war criminal. He was just one of 100,000 others like him. He was a lieutenant with some degree of responsibility. He certainly signed some papers. He certainly lied. He couldn't not have known what was happening at Salonika. It was common knowledge. Certainly he knew, so he lied when he said he didn't. He's a grey zoner! He's a man with a very real responsibility, but one that dwells within the greater responsibility of the Nazi machine.

RS: Maybe he also fabricated his own set of truths?

PL: Oh, he didn't need to. He's too lucid to need to fabricate a set of truths, don't you think? He certainly is in possession of documents

10. See Emanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* (Schocken Books: New York, 1974).

himself. He knows what he did because he was there. But he's also very astute, and he rightly counted on the solidarity of the Austrian people. I heard a very interesting comment a while back. If in Nixon's day the Watergate affair had been touched off *not* in the United States but by another country, Nixon might never have resigned. He might have stayed where he was, probably gaining votes. And there would have been talk of a foreign conspiracy, maybe inspired by the Russians!

RS: Have you ever asked yourself what your life would have been like without Auschwitz?

PL: Yes, of course! Not only have I asked myself that question, but everyone else asks me that too! I don't know how to answer. It's as if I asked you, "If you hadn't been born in America, what would you do?" You can't answer that.

RS: Yes, but you had a life before Auschwitz.

PL: Yes, I did. I don't know, but I can make some suppositions. I probably wouldn't have taken up writing, or I would have written who knows what. I was a chemist beforehand—by conviction, mind you! In fact, I worked as a chemist all my life. I think I can take as examples some of my friends who didn't go to Auschwitz and who tranquilly continued in their professions. They started families. I started a family, too; I got married and I had children. If I hadn't gone to Auschwitz, I probably wouldn't have written, or I would have written completely different things—maybe scholarly articles about chemistry. I certainly possessed the capacity to write, I can't deny that. I wasn't born of nothing: I had received a fairly rigid classical education and I already possessed the faculty to write. But I wouldn't have had—how can I explain it?—the "raw material" to become a writer.

RS: Do you concentrate on style in your books?

PL: Now I do; when I wrote *Survival in Auschwitz* I didn't.

RS: And yet you have a compelling style.

PL: At that time, I didn't pay any attention to style. I wrote *Survival in Auschwitz* without giving it a second thought: at night, in the lab, on the train, wherever I happened to find myself. But I didn't have much time then—I was also engaged to be married!

Miklós Haraszti

THE VELVET PRISON

The naive confidence of Milton, for whom total censorship was neither desirable nor attainable, would strike many people today as utterly absurd. Milton believed that such censorship was a fantasy, a feature only of "Atlantic and Utopian polities." Its imposition was an impossibility in the real world. In the wars of Truth, Falsehood was destined to be defeated. Censorship was a "fruitless and defective" weapon whose use would promote what it was intended to prevent. His splendid arguments, which were convincing for so long a time, have been swept away by the avalanche of totalitarian socialism in the twentieth century.

Censorship is no longer a matter of simple state intervention. A new aesthetic culture has emerged in which censors and artists alike are entangled in a mutual embrace. Nor is it as distasteful as traditional critics of censorship imagine. The state is able to domesticate the artist because the artist has already made the state his home.

It is not that one does not encounter state meddling in the arts—the traditional form of censorship—in the socialist countries; rather, such meddling is no longer used to silence opposition to the state, but to ensure that intellectuals will more effectively perform their proper role. Moreover, such interference is felt by today's intellectuals to be less onerous than it was in the past. If one were to eavesdrop on the conversation of artists and writers as they gather for their mid-morning tea break at any of Hungary's country villas reserved for intellectuals, or on the chitchat of high-ranking functionary artists after an official conference, one would be surprised to hear the satisfaction with which they tell each other about their "misadventures" with the state. For censorship is the final glaze that the state applies to the work of art before approving its release to the public.

Editor's Note: This essay is adapted from the forthcoming *New Republic* Book, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism* by Miklós Haraszti. Translated from the Hungarian by Katalin and Stephen Landesmann with the help of Steve Wasserman. English translation copyright © 1987 by Basic Books, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, Inc., New York, NY.

The old censorship is increasingly being superseded by something altogether new, less visible, and more dangerous. The techniques of the new censorship are fundamentally different from those employed by classical censorship. The heavy-handed methods of the past are pressed into service only when the new ones fail to function properly. That this occurs relatively rarely in Hungary testifies not to the state's liberalization but to the growing success of more subtle means of constraint. Traditional censorship presupposes the inherent opposition of creators and censors; the new censorship strives to eliminate this antagonism. The artist and the censor—the two faces of official culture—diligently and cheerfully cultivate the gardens of art together. This new culture is the result not of raging censorship but of its steady disappearance. Censorship professes itself to be freedom because it acts, like morality, as the common spirit of both the rulers and the ruled.

Our rulers impress this on our minds time and again. In the past, censors never dreamed of justifying their acts of suppression by boasting of the many battles that have been fought for cultural freedom. Even the bloodiest terror did not give the old-fashioned dictators the sense of security that would permit them this joke. Of course, the joke works only where it is not funny; where the ideology of censorship has absorbed the ideology of the censored; where tyranny has learned the language of its victims; where the existence of censorship is based on a lasting identity of interests between censor and censored; where censorship (if it has its own office at all) is not the simple oppressor of those who create culture, but is their natural home.

If I still speak of censorship, what I refer to is not merely certain bureaucratic procedures but the whole context of culture; not just state intervention, but all the circumstances that conspire to destroy the basis of autonomous or authentic artistic activity; not just political *Diktat*, but the individual's *Weltanschauung* within an all-embracing and unified society; not only "legal" and "illegal" restrictions, but also the secret psychological sources that sustain the state's reach even in the last cell of culture. I refer not only to punishment but also to reward and sustenance, privilege and ambition. I wish to describe the kind of censorship that is not the skin of our culture but its skeleton. I am interested not only in the outer regulations that restrain the artist, but also, and primarily, the inner gravitation, the downward pull, of the artist's imagination.

But of course everything has its price. Art's new function—to

be a “true reflection” of reality — conceals a taboo: We must exclude all art that might suggest that reality is, or sometimes is, nonaligned, indifferent, absurd, intangible, deaf, blind, or dumb. This taboo is a permanent feature of the cult of commitment. If, before the advent of state socialism, political art had always to protest reality, today it must always affirm reality. The dream of a world in which only art that is positive, life-affirming, and constructively committed can exist has been realized. This art neither hates nor worships “reality.” It merely denies reality a chance to be mysterious.

The quality of any particular work of art arises neither from its interdependent elements nor from unforeseen innovations. The harmony of its elements is linked to their intent, and this in turn is rooted in their common purpose. They need be neither unrepeatable nor necessarily original. The socially engaged artist is progressive even when he uses archaisms, or popularizes, or borrows. For he has the freedom to ransack the whole treasure chest of past culture. The sign of his originality is his ability to find ever more suitable and imaginative ways of expressing the socialist message.

The artist is a social planner. He not only inspires his public, but also organizes it. Artistic enjoyment is complete, and the work of art is judged healthy, only in terms of the Historic Plan. The aesthetic merit of a work of art is measured by the extent to which, in its structure, fantasy world, and passions, it conforms to the needs of concrete social action; otherwise, the artist’s commitment would not be credible. Truly artistic works are those in which the socialist message is indivisible from the aesthetic means chosen to express it. The artist must package the message in such a way that the audience experiences it as a kind of revelation. The best package for this purpose is the world itself. That’s why the socially engaged artist must “mirror reality.” Realism is the most accessible and least distorting way of encapsulating this message.

The work of art must not become sheer rhetoric. This danger looms large for socialist art: it is like the pull of gravity. Socialist art may be art only in relation to political rhetoric, but the fact that it is “more” than mere rhetoric makes it art. This art gravitates not toward autonomy but toward the message.

Because it is the social influence of such art that this aesthetics considers quintessentially artistic, the artist needs “outside” direction. Critics condemn this need as anti-artistic. But they are wrong. For the first time since the Christian Middle Ages, the public spirit of art is released by this need. And this is not a step backward. Only

in the modern planned society, a society owned by the state, will art achieve such an exalted stature. This aesthetic, which is the basis of state culture, has evolved almost imperceptibly. Previously the social aspect of a work of art would have been no more important than any other. Today only the work that expresses a social meaning is artistically valuable.

From the point of view of the aesthetics of censorship, this achievement is more than a fashionable idea; it is a turning point: artistic pleasure, once a private affair, is now the means for social insight, itself complicit in the transformation of society. The idea of commitment, a small, seemingly innocuous step in late bourgeois art, is culturally an enormous leap. Without it, the directed art of state socialism could hardly have come into being, let alone flourished.

I do not have to glorify Party and state, the soul and body of the common good. I need not even celebrate the corporate society as the triumph of intellect and sentiment. It is sufficient that I do not reject the idea of the planned common good and do not preclude the possibility that the planners of the common good might ultimately succeed. I may express my discontent, even my unhappiness, as long as I do so constructively. I may utilize any possible means to achieve the publication of my works, the exhibition of my paintings, and the showing of my films.

But if the expression of my artistic consciousness is made public, this will have happened only because I have employed a coauthor: the state. My audience knows that I am a permitted author with a permitted message. The expression of my aesthetic sensibility can be neither imagined nor acted out in any other way. I am a painter, sculptor, signwriter, chronicler of the pharaoh: even my most personal discovery or insight is used only to decorate the pyramid of socialism. All my creations are based upon a set of axioms; my aesthetic explorations are variations of acknowledged truths. I have been given a magic flute, out of which flows one unchanging tune: "I owe my soul to the company store."

It is vanity of vanities to believe that artists and audience are smarter than the state's administrators as victims of old-fashioned censorship might have hoped. We contribute to the co-optation of our audience with our art and, for its part, the co-opted public's ears, eyes, and taste buds further co-opt our art. Nationalized consciousness speaks to nationalized consciousness. Even the unhappy consciousness is nationalized, as is the lonely one. It was not a mistake

but a masterstroke on the part of censorship to have passed the artists on to the audience. The social context swallows up even those techniques that the artist might have hoped to use for alienating effect. Traditional censorship might have provoked resistance, but the repressive tolerance of the new aesthetics of censorship has created aesthetic automatons.

The State Artist

"The writer is the engineer of the soul." This dictum of Stalin's is more to the point than any of his followers' lengthy paraphrases of it. It encourages us to tinker with the consciousness of the public. This metaphor is also an ingenious definition of the scope of artistic freedom under the conditions of totalitarian socialism: we are neither more independent nor more defenseless than the engineer. The state artist, too, is an organized professional.

This metaphor also implies that censorship and self-censorship are essential, in the same way that the engineer must reject his own exciting, but solipsistic ideas. His job is to make certain that trains run smoothly and on time, not to determine destinations. Stalin's apt dictum signals the historical demise of the "independent" intellectual. Henceforth, social planning embraces all previously independent activity.

Where the individual's and the artist's short-lived autonomy are replaced by an assimilation similar to that of Egyptian, Chinese, or medieval cultures, one is too easily tempted to blame this on cultural backwardness. But Stalin's metaphor is not an abuse of industrial society's ideals. On the contrary, it is the metaphor of mature industrial consciousness. Those who do not insist on the dogma according to which freedom and progress are interdependent, will recognize that the Marxist-Leninist project can be furnished with the achievements of postindustrial society.

Stalin's metaphor would be acceptable to any capitalist television company. Totalitarian socialism simply removed the obstacles that stood in the artist-engineer's way. It stimulated the hegemony of expertise through violence. Our new civilization may have experienced particularly sharp labor pains, but it gave birth to an industrial discipline that surely must be the envy of those capitalists in the West who still have to contend with unruly unions and surly workers. The socialist state's identification of art with education is the open tyranny of the modern age. Planning allowed a glimpse of

its nature as openly as this only in societies where it encountered little democratic resistance.

It might seem as if extreme poverty contributed to the need for centralized planning. But economic “backwardness” is simply a good precursor for nationalization, a kind of baby food. When the culture of socialist planning has matured, it realizes that it came into this world to be society’s ruler, progress’s God, in a civilization created for its sake.

Stalin’s metaphor envisages a society in which his followers can afford to experiment with variety and depoliticization. But the state artist remains the engineer of the soul even in a “decentralized” society. We no longer wish to cut the umbilical cord that connects us with the whole of society, because our soul is like that of an engineer.

**Translated from the Hungarian by Katalin
and Stephen Landesmann**

Leonard Michaels

KISHKAS

A nation of immigrants, we adore worldly success because it proves we exist despite attenuated roots or none. But more interesting than success is its dark brother, failure, and the strange fascination with failure that haunts American literature from the apocalyptic grandeur of *Moby Dick* through the pathos of *Sister Carrie* and *Seize the Day*, or the gruelling agonies of *Death of a Salesman*, or the poignant ironies of *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Lolita*, and innumerable short stories and poems. Imagine then millions of failed pages on failure, laboriously wrought, deeply sincere, discoloring in drawers and boxes about the land. Something very like this—unheard, unseen, immanent—is made vast and looming in “The Yachts,” a frightening poem by William Carlos Williams, where he discovers a spectral thrill in the heart of failure. Williams sees the nervous and exhilarating beauty of racing yachts, and abruptly suffers an access of vision:

. . . a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair
. . . the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
the whole sea . . . an entanglement of watery bodies . . .
beaten, desolate, reaching up from the dead . . .
they cry out, failing, failing!

My entanglement with watery bodies occurred mainly in Hollywood, but it began in New York, in 1979, when an editor at *Cosmopolitan* invited me to write for the magazine. I submitted a story called “The Men’s Club.” It was refused. Ultimately, *Esquire* published the story, and, sometime later, I made it into the first chapter of a novel which was received with praise and sneering, in 1981, and went into several foreign languages even as the desolate hand reached for me.

Some reviewers said the novel is an allegory; others thought it satirizes the women’s movement; one reviewer called me a “misogynist”; another said “feminist.” It was as if I’d been talking to someone on the platform of a train station when a locomotive—*The Zeitgeist Cannonball*—rumbled by and sucked my sense after it. I felt emptied; dispossessed.

Writing the novel was easy. I liked the characters and laughed at them. These men didn't understand women, didn't even understand what they didn't understand. The subject, male friendship, wasn't new to me. Now I remembered my mother saying, when I was a kid, "You're laughing. Soon you'll be crying." She meant there was much to fear in this world. Hitler, dogs, large bodies of water, strangers. Laughter could catch the hate of an evil ear.

The phone rang with New York theater people and Hollywood. It sounded like success. I probably should have relished it, but I left town, and, for about ten days, drove alone across the country in a mood of nauseating delirium. Dogwood was in bloom from Baltimore to Birmingham, airy white rivers along the highway that simplified me, made me feel happy sometimes for fifty miles. I talked to nobody until I met a couple in a motel bar near El Paso. They owned a local ranch.

The women said, "Bud, we are so right-wing, we're almost fascist. Do you have a gun in your car?"

"Me? No."

"No? You're driving across Texas *without a gun*?"

I wondered if I were breaking some law. The man pressed toward me. "What Luella wants to say is that we can tell you're on the left politically. I used to live in New York, too, and I know you can't help it. I know what you feel. Everything in the world ought to be divvied up. It would be the best thing. But communism won't work because most people are no damned good."

To prove his point he showed me a nine-millimeter handgun, let me heft it, feel its cold hard cogency. If one could write like that. . . .

By the time I got home to Berkeley, Twentieth Century Fox had completed negotiations with my agent for an option on the novel. The producer, Howard Gottfried, flew out to meet me. We took a walk, discussed the novel.

"I'd like to ask a question," he said.

"Okay."

"What does it mean?"

"It's about men. How some of them are."

"Sure, but what does it mean?"

I could hear them cry out, failing, failing!

What does it mean to say what it means? I only describe. Seven men in Berkeley gather to form a club. . . .

A screenwriter was hired. With amazing speed, he wrote some

opening scenes, but Howard didn't think they would do. They lacked a quality he was after. I wasn't permitted to read the scenes for fear of legal complications later. Howard approached other screenwriters, but all were busy writing movies. I asked him to let me try a few sketchy pages. "For free." Howard liked them. I was hired. My agent, very shocked, said, "You gave him pages?"

The word seemed exceedingly literal. What else could I give him? When I mentioned it to Howard, he said, "It isn't always called 'pages.' It's sometimes called 'shit.' A studio executive says, 'The writer turned in some shit.'"

The writer—me—believed Hollywood paid well for "shit" and the work entailed no personal sacrifice, it was pure play, innocent and lucrative happiness. It would be good for his soul to join the humble community of screenwriters. He didn't believe their stories of anguish and humiliation since they were attached to nothing a screenwriter could control and for which he could feel responsible.

Lawyers and agents created a contract. I'd turn in a first draft of a screenplay in twelve weeks. Six or seven months later, when much of the novel had been thrown out, and the intimacy and density of the male landscape was dissipated, "opened out" for the sake of a movie, Howard said, "This is it. I feel it in my *kishkas*, a great movie."

Once, when I had lost faith in the new material—broke down, couldn't continue—I flew to New York to talk to Howard. He was receptive, enormously encouraging, confident of the screenplay. My feelings for it were increasingly vicarious. The creature of my contract, a writer for hire, I was always asking, "What do you think?" A surge of relief rose in me when Howard was pleased. By the end of the meeting in New York, I was high, full of ideas, anxious to get back to work. Be pleasing. "See," said Howard, "when you walked in that door, you had nothing."

It was embarrassing, but writers better than I had done this, exactly for money and the satisfaction of another person. I assumed that is how movies are written. Until then writing had been lonely, occasionally joyous but mainly miserable, with no financial reward for months and months. Now it was a social activity, a thousand phone calls and meetings, incessant talk. I'd read fresh pages over the telephone. Not one word was let stand without immediate evaluation. I felt sometimes like a secretary of the occult. When my ideas and dialogue were pleasing, it was because they struck an uncanny chord, in Howard, of rightness.

The work itself, hours and hours of typing and retyping, was torture but always relieved by flights to New York and L.A., fine hotels and restaurants, and kicks with Howard. Once, in a hotel lobby, waiting for him, I spotted a university colleague. His limp, his cane, his silvery head with black framed glasses, the lenses turning to me, perhaps seeing but not yet recognizing me before I slipped behind a pillar. I'd known him for years. I liked him, but didn't want to say hello. The hotel was too classy, not my style, not me, I wasn't here. When Howard appeared I darted to his side, then out to the street. We were off to a great dinner, rattling together about the movie. I lived in two worlds, the university and this one of cryptic pleasures.

He knew the movie business, its intricacies of money, power, and talent. He'd worked with the greats, had had success. I didn't learn much about the business, except that it really is a business, but I learned about myself, discovering a weird susceptibility to self-violation and the curiosity it inspired, watching myself as in a penitential exercise, perversely moral, without a god. It was impossible to write one line without caring, and yet everything was compromised, even the caring. The soul has ways of sliding through compromise, continuing to care, like discovering your kid is hooked on drugs when he swears he isn't — repelled, infuriated, refusing ever again to care, you care. Lewis B. Mayer puts it differently: "A screenwriter is a schmuck with an Underwood." I used an Olivetti, small grey machine, nice touch.

After years in the business, a screenwriter might come to feel, always and only, "If they like my work, I like it." Liking their liking as one is turned on during sexual intercourse by the partner's moans. The phenomenon is represented in the hysteria of movie reviewers: "Wow!" "The best!" They remind you that a movie is registered in the *kishkas*, a physical occasion.

Lights go down and fantastic sensations of goodness begin. When the movie ends, it's also physical. Like being ripped untimely from the womb, you're disoriented, adrift, homeless, and burdened by regret, as if something could have been other than it is for you. A small, unacknowledged misery of modern times. You see it in the emerging faces, lashed by the electrical marquee, unready to go, get out, give up their dreams to others. Some remain forever in love with Tuesday Weld or Cary Grant. For others it doesn't matter what movie they've just seen. Compared to feeling real, a movie is really feeling.

Tell somebody who loves a movie that you didn't like it. See the shock and hatred in his face. "Hey, man," you say, "it's only a movie." For an instant, he could have killed you. How odd that people can be so taken, yet even those most deeply steeped in movies hardly ever quote lines exactly or remember accurately what happens in a single scene, unless they've watched a movie twice, determined really to know it. The most powerful art form of our day depends on passionate incoherence, in our memory, for its effects.

The eye is glazed. The mouth hangs in a slack, flat face. They trudge, zombies of post-movie-triste, back into the world. It isn't fair. A movie is big, a human head is small.

One night, during a trip to L.A., we went to the Polo Lounge and sat with an acquaintance of Howard who owned "a hundred screens," or movie theaters. As we talked, a young woman came to our table and pressed her thighs against the edge, fusing herself to it as she stared at us. A minute passed without a word. Faintly exasperated, as if we should have guessed what she wanted, she said, "My girlfriend Samantha Turetzky is late."

"Want to join us while you're waiting?" I asked. The way she pressed the table (daddy's leg?) was original.

"I thought you'd never ask," she said, then sat with us and was soon chatting happily. When Samantha arrived, neither said hello to the other. Samantha took the seat beside me and began talking mechanically, as though she'd been doing it all evening and become oblivious to her company. She was very thin and pale, with long, luxurious, black, romantic hair. She called herself a "working girl." I was moved; reminded of myself, maybe. She took a brush out of her purse and, in the middle of the Polo Lounge, began brushing her long hair.

"I'd never do this in public," she said, and then, "I'm boring. I'm so boring. I never even finished high school."

She talked like that, apparently, to rid herself of anxiety. Her heart wasn't in her work. I'd met others who were semiprofessionals—straight jobs on the side—whoring only for clothes, a rent-free condominium, cocaine, a man, or just attention. Samantha brushed her hair, talking every minute, and didn't seem the least calculating of her effects.

Howard's acquaintance encouraged the working girls to order dinner, then signaled a waiter and told him to put everything on his bill. A very sweet man, I thought, since two dinners at the Polo Lounge probably cost more than they could ask for their bodies; and

then, as they were eating, he said goodnight. It seemed like a little lesson in humanity. Howard and I said goodnight to them a few moments later. It was easier than I expected to leave. I liked Samantha and put some of her remarks into the screenplay. I did the same later with an argument between Howard and me. I'd written "woman" at one place in the stage directions. Howard said, "But she's a whore. Write 'whore.'"

"She's a woman."

"Whore."

"Woman."

We were in a restaurant and I was shouting as if my integrity were at stake.

Howard turned in the screenplay to Twentieth Century Fox. They read it almost overnight, but didn't feel it in their *kishkas*. They said, "Too mature. Where's the audience for this?" Howard took the screenplay to every other studio. It was universally rejected. But then some well-known actors read it and seemed to desire parts. The screenplay had an unusually large number of words, pages dark with type. It even opened with a talking head as the lead character tells a story. The actors might have liked the challenge of words, having to act, make an audience listen, survive the lingering scrutiny of the camera.

Using the actors' names, Howard could raise money independently, but months passed, the option on the novel lapsed, and it wasn't renewed. Everything seemed over; the work was lost. Howard became involved with another movie, but he phoned regularly. It wasn't over for him. He said money was coming in, a little here, a little there. This thing would not be allowed to die. I was skeptical and kept asking, "When is it going to happen?" He couldn't say, but he was positive it was going to happen.

From skepticism I fell into black doubt. There had been too many rejections. The screenplay was shopworn, passed around too much, soiled, cheapened. Not merely rejected; many disliked it. It wasn't a novel or a poem; the opinions of other people mattered. Worst of all, when I reread the screenplay, I didn't know what I felt about it. When one doesn't know writing is okay, it isn't okay, but there had been too much talk and praise and encouragement. There had also been tremendous work. More than anything work is destructive of judgement.

I once visited a monastery built by monks in the wilderness. They'd carved every stone by hand. It took them years to complete

and they were very content with it, but their work was so brutally ugly that it seemed to comment on their faith. I wandered in halls and courtyard looking for a redeeming touch. There was no vision, no sensibility. In works of true self-abnegating faith, is there a necessary ugliness?

When Howard had laughed at lines, I laughed and felt great. To think I'd written *that*. Now, in the middle of the night, I'd wake up frightened, go to my desk, reread the screenplay and not know. It was like waking up blind. I phoned my agent. "Is it good? Tell me the truth."

"It's good," he said. "It's a very valuable property."

Some friends read it and said it isn't good, others said it is. One friend, a film critic and scholar, said, "Look, the best screenplay in the world can be made into a lousy movie." Was the reverse also true? Harassing people with questions about essential value was futile. There was no truth.

Late winter, 1985, I went to the opening of two short plays by David Mamet, *Prarie du Chien* and *The Shawl*. They were about relations between imagination and reality, and the powers and terrors of estrangement in artists. The subject has been treated by Shakespeare, Byron, Blake, Kafka, and Wallace Stevens, among others. Mamet's plays seemed to me moving and very good. The next day, when critics attacked the plays, I thought only desire and luck prevailed in this world; maybe there had never been anything else. I felt a strange hope for my screenplay. If it wasn't good, could it be bad enough to succeed?

Other movie people approached me about the novel. Just the novel. One was brutally plain: "If they make that screenplay, with your name in the credits, you'll never work again." But if he made the novel a movie, I'd have artistic success. More money, too. I was immensely tempted, but never in my life have I succumbed to my own best interests. One evening in a bar, I pulled a five-by-eight file card from my briefcase, scribbled an option renewal agreement on it, signed my name, handed it to Howard. No lawyers, no agents, and drunk, I put an end to agonized indeterminacy. Like getting married not to deal with the excruciating prospect of backing out. Afterwards you feel much better about yourself. G. Wilson Knight, the great Shakespearean critic, says MacBeth murders Duncan because he's afraid he might not. Hamlet acts similarly. I've rarely acted otherwise.

Money for a low budget production was suddenly in the bank.

A shooting schedule was drawn up and a date for rehearsals set. I was told to cancel whatever I was doing, make no further plans, be in Hollywood on that date. Since it was a low budget production, no more fine hotels for me. I'd sleep in motels near the lot.

The lot, Hollywood Center, was crowded and hectic, movies in production all about. Gorgeous women strolled by like normal people. It came home to me that making movies was a way of life, and I was eager to begin, but a few days later I was kicked out.

I made the actors uneasy, inhibited their creative impulses. "We want to be alone with our director." I sat in the production office with nothing to do. Finally someone said, "Why don't you go back to Berkeley? You can read poems to pretty coeds. You don't really have to be here. Your script is so good they can't ruin it. Return when filming begins."

It's best if the writer isn't present, but I'd been told to be there, make no other plans, etc. Now I felt exiled. To explain this to friends in Berkeley was hard. One said, "Are your feelings hurt?"

"I don't feel great."

"But are your feelings hurt?"

Exiled from myself, too, I was unable to say my feelings were hurt. I languished for weeks in crepuscular gloom.

The director, Peter Medak, sometimes phoned. "Today the air conditioning system broke down. It's the hottest summer in L.A. history. But everything is going well. You needn't be worried about your lines. The actors are saying only what you wrote, at least eighty percent."

Just before filming began, he said, "You're welcome, darling, but please don't come. I'll let you know how things are going. There's nothing to worry about. You're in reasonably good hands." Others phoned, too. I heard about disagreements over camera work, screaming fights on the set, blood on the walls, broken glass, teeth knocked out.

"What about the fighting, Peter?"

"It means people care. It's a good sign. What a courageous script. Such truth. Get your tux ready for the Academy Awards."

When the filming ended, I was reinvited to L.A.

On a hot dead Hollywood afternoon, in the summer of 1985, six years after I'd submitted a story called "The Men's Club" to *Cosmopolitan*, I sat in a cool, comfortable screening room and watched the rough-cut version of the movie.

"That it should come to this," says Hamlet. What force and

point there is in "should." Today, we don't much use the word like that. A realm of human experience slips away from our language. I stood outside in the twilight waiting for Howard. When he came up, I said, "Can you reshoot some scenes?"

"There's no money in the budget to reshoot anything."

He was irritated. My question was more judgement than question. "Well," he said, "what should we do, kill ourselves?"

We were in it together, but I could feel only for myself. Disgrace, like internal bleeding, seeped into my bones and organs. As we walked toward the production office, he said, "Don't tell anyone what you think about the movie."

Oh, the rough cut wasn't all that bad. There were excellent performances. But that night, alone in my motel room, I watched the whole movie again, as I would for months thereafter when I was alone. Of one thing in the world I was sure. There was truth.

I saw it in the cracked tile about the bathtub, mildew in the walls, paint that bulged and split, a faucet that dribbled like an idiot, disease-yellow stains in the bedspread, and the pressure of squalid light when I turned on the lamp beside the bed. All mine; of my soul. The wicked, says Plato, shall suffer in this life just being what they are. I'd been very wicked, and now it astonished me, the tears, the ferociousness of my shame.

The motel wasn't far from Fairfax Avenue. Old men in dapper gabardines walked about long after midnight. They couldn't sleep, had nothing to do but wait for morning, then sip hot water and lemon, read the *Los Angeles Times*, nibble a prune Danish. Some wore hats, a touch of style, formal and jaunty, from the optimistic forties. Dear God, as You know, I wanted to be old, too. Need so little. I wouldn't resent the young their burning, but only pity its disgustingness, the lust there is in breathing, the predatory brightness of their movie eyes. Give me cataracts. Put them on the eyes of my soul where the movie kept playing.

I'd described one character as having a slight speech defect. The actor came on with a sickeningly violent stutter. His stuttering hurt, like a gratuitous personal insult, so much that it felt deserved.

They said a rough cut is always terrible. Movies are made in the editing room. We had miles and miles of film. A good movie had only to be discovered in those miles of film. I was invited to help with the editing. I flew back and forth between Berkeley and L.A., grateful to be allowed to help. About ten scenes were cut, which had dire effects on structure, but the movie gained lunging energy and

speed. It improved. Then disagreements flared once more. Somebody was fired. Somebody quit.

As the movie changed, gradually becoming the thing for which no more could be done, I went down to L.A. less frequently, then finally stopped. I missed hanging out at the Formosa bar after work, and eating dinner at the Chianti, the Rose, and Joe Allen's. I missed the glaring nighttime anxiety of Sunset Boulevard and the languid sweep of Santa Monica Boulevard from Hollywood through the imperial quietude of Beverly Hills and on to the grandeur of the Pacific, and also the deep mystery of San Vincente, how it bends and thrusts from lovely neighborhoods to eery desolation. A dozen times I got lost and had to ask for help.

"You're looking for Melrose? It's right around here. It used to be somewhere else, but listen, baby, I moved a couple of years ago."

Avenues and streets were a gigantic nervous system, flashed with excitements, congealed with neurotic atmospheres or dull dry oppressive peacefulness. I missed L.A. like an old strange friend.

One of the reviewers said he went to see *The Men's Club* with his girl, and he was laughing, enjoying himself, telling her that this is what men are "really like." She hissed, "Slime!" He writes that he sat quietly weighing her insight, then cried, "*Pig slime!*" Winning her respect, certainly. In the movie, as in life, bitch-wimp relations end in marriage. I wished him happiness and I supposed, among its sad flaws, the move is more true than correct. With a few exceptions, reviews were bludgeoningly bad.

Ten days after the movie opened, Howard phoned.

"The movie is dead."

"That's depressing."

"Nobody can feel worse than I do."

I thought I could. When he said goodbye, I would feel lonely, abandoned to reviewers, like a rape victim who not only suffers the opinions of cops but also feels guilty. I tried to keep talking, not let him hang up. It was no use. He managed a closing line.

"Well, we had some fun, didn't we?"

FICTION

Leonard Kriegel

LOVE AND POLITICS IN NEW YORK

"I'm bisexual," is what she says. Laughing. Except for the unlaced yellow tennis sneakers, which Michael pulls from her feet before he lies down next to her in the king-sized bed that once belonged to his parents, she is naked. Her laugh is a light metallic clicking. And it makes Michael nervous. He searches her eyes for a touch of fever. Or even madness. But all he finds are brown pupils pushed to a color so deep they seem liquid dark. He pulls her to him and she winks. A comic obscenity. His lips brush her neck and he hears her bite loudly into the Granny Smith apple she takes from the red cut glass bowl on the night table next to the bed. His mother had always insisted that the bowl had been picked up by her grandfather in Vienna, when he was on his way to America. In 1914. Just before the war his mother called "*the war*" started.

Michael turns away, pushing Miriam gently back to her side of the bed. Despite his irritation, he smiles. Another legacy. The bowl unwilling but left in his keeping two and a half years back, on that bright November day in 1983 when he returned from Paris, three days before his father and his father's new bride left the apartment in Chelsea for an oversized suburban house in Bedford. A spasm of thunder tears at the New York evening. Announcements. To justify all the legacies. Even Miriam.

"Illana's young," he remembers his father telling him. "I can afford to give her whatever she wants. So we'll try the suburbs. Besides, what's wrong with wanting what everybody else wants?"

A question Michael was tempted to repeat fourteen months later, when his father and Illana — nineteen years his father's junior, four years his senior, and exactly six days older than Miriam — return to the city, the dead weight of Bedford made lighter by the \$65,000 profit his father gleefully tells him he has turned over on the sale of the house.

"Keep this place, Michael," his father generously offers. "The twins will be in school for the next two years. And they're both talking about settling in California for good."

"Where will you live?"

"I bought a co-op off Gramercy Park. It's more Illana's style than Bedford."

"God works in mysterious ways," Michael laughs.

"Never mind God," his father says. "There are no mysteries in real estate, Michael. Even when I was organizing, I understood the simple equations. Buy cheap, sell dear. Then try to buy cheaper and sell dearer. It's all in the progressions. Nothing so violent it rocks the boat. You don't learn that from reading Marx."

"Don't you?" Michael says.

His father waves his hand, dismissing his question. "Illana wants stability. She's pregnant. Your father is about to become a father."

"I'll be twenty-five in another four months," Michael says.

"And I'll be forty-nine in another three weeks. So what? I've got you and the girls. Now I'll have a baby. It's a funny world."

Funny enough, Michael thinks. For here he is now, a year later, lying in his parents' bed next to Miriam. In front of him is the blank television screen, the same set he and Miriam would watch when she used to sit for his sisters. And she has just announced she is bisexual in a voice she might have used to ask him whether he liked a yellow turtleneck sweater. His new sister is five months old and ensconced in a large apartment in what the real estate ads now called "a distinguished pre-war apartment residence," while her mother pores through booklets from the Dalton School and Ethical Culture and the Lycee. "Illana says it's never too early," his father had told him at dinner two nights earlier. He and his father now had dinner once a week, usually in the Irish bar across the street. "She wants the best for Katherine."

"What do you want for Katherine?"

"What I want for the girls. Or for you."

"Name it," Michael demands, unable to force the irritation from his voice. "Name the legacy. Real estate. Antiques. Securities."

"You want to be a writer, Michael," his father says, right index finger tapping the rim of the shot glass on the table in front of him, "so be a writer. But not on my ass. Don't confuse it with virtue. I knew your mother's friends. There wasn't one of them who didn't pant after his dollar. In this world, Michael. And I don't know of any other."

"I don't know of any other either," Michael admits. He is angry

with himself, ticking off legacies the way as a child he used to delight in listing the titles of books he had read. The apartment in the co-op built by the union his father had been an organizer for, the rosewood desk and matching chair his father insisted on leaving for him, the king-sized bed he was lying on now with Miriam—"She wants new stuff, Illana," his father explains, embarrassed—the battered Royal portable on which his mother had written all three of her books of poetry. And the thickness of memory. That ultimate Jewish legacy. To be so caught up in the drab history the rest of the world would remember—if it remembered at all—as a minor footnote. Living in the union co-op was like living in a time warp. A few months ago he had ridden up in the elevator with the 94-year-old anarchist whose skin was mottled like Chinese rice paper. "I knew Trotsky," the anarchist announces in his Italian-accented English. "You've read Trotsky?" Michael nods. "I knew him."

His father's laughter mocking, derisive. His father had long since left such illusions behind. A young wife, a new baby daughter, a large apartment on Gramercy Park, the presidency of an investment service that controlled a good deal of the municipal union's pension funds—and dreams that were undoubtedly different from the dreams of his son. Dreams of land parcels, development opportunities, refinancing mortgages, high-risk bonds, whirls and swirls of green. "Trotsky!" his father snorts. "Better he should know Hecuba. What's he to Trotsky?" His father laughs gleefully. "Michael, in the here and now, people eat and drink and sleep. They make love. And Trotsky doesn't matter."

"That's crass," Michael says angrily, then winces at the opening he has given his father.

"Crass!" his father mocks, so that the horse-faced Irish bartender looks up suddenly. "Real isn't crass, Michael. You want to understand the future, learn Japanese. This longing for revolution is nonsense. Useless nonsense."

What I should have learned, he thinks, fingers running lightly across Miriam's quietly receptive body, is the language of New York. A language for our times. "You used to have politics," he remembers telling his father.

"And you think having politics is a distinction. You think it's better than buying and selling real estate. Some old man in an elevator tells you he knew Trotsky and you expect the world to turn upside down." His father pauses, to sip at his scotch. He likes to

watch his father drink. Neat and controlled. "Your mother, Michael. She filled you with all that romantic shit. The rights of working people, the need for dignity. The whole *schtick*."

"You were a goddamn organizer," Michael pleads.

"No different from working in Wall Street, Michael. Only the stakes aren't as high. It was your mother who gave you those ideas."

"I took what I wanted," Michael says angrily.

"Then take stability," his father urges. "It's not a crime. It's more real than some old man who knew Trotsky. Michael, that's nonsense. Even if it's true. Don't you understand, those things don't matter anymore. Not here. Not in 1986."

Perhaps he could have forced his father to acknowledge that it was not the times but the men that had changed. Only he didn't want to quarrel with his father. And he suspected his father was right. About the Left and about a lot of other things, too. God knows, life was better for his father now, better than it had been during the long three years of his mother's dying and the years after that, when he and the twins would sit down at supper with his father and stare at him as if he were some stranger arbitrarily set down in their midst. Absence engulfing the apartment. And his father using concern for their future as a way to give up organizing. He remembers the afternoon his father came home to tell them Scherefsky had asked him to serve as the labor man on the largest mutual fund in the country. "I'm taking it," his father announced, as if he and the twins—how old were they then, eleven, twelve—had it within their power to change his decision. Within five years, before Michael finishes his junior year in college, his father will be president of the fund. "Better rich," he remembers his father saying caustically. "Even for writers. Like you. And your mother."

Well, his father was certainly right about that. It was better rich and easier, too. It was his father's money that had bought him the fourteen months in Paris after his graduation from Columbia and it was his father's money—living rent-free in New York—that allowed him to write now. His father had never put any pressure on him. Writing, too, was cash-and-carry in America. There was little sacrifice to it. And less virtue.

Only he still had difficulty accepting that they had all become what they had once feared to be. His living father, his dead mother. Myths collapsing all around them. "You can't run from history," screams his dying mother. "Not your own, not the world's." History was fact. Stalin, Hitler, the murder of the Jewish doctors. Facts that

finally blotted out even metaphors. As much fact as Miriam lying beside him, half-eaten apple browning now and still in hand. Announcing she was bisexual with the same sense of surety she once used to let the twins know it was time for milk and cookies and bed.

As if she knows what he is thinking, Michael feels the small of her back shift lightly beneath his hand. "Bisexual," she purrs. He looks down at her. Shreds of green apple skin on her parted lips, she laughs that irritatingly narrow metallic laugh once again. "How does it make you feel, Michael?"

"Nothing surprises me, Miriam." Suddenly, he finds himself joining in her laughter. "I'm a child of New York."

"Nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing," Michael says, flipping her onto her stomach and sliding up against her. "Not even the real estate market."

Dead days in winter. His father and his father's new bride still in Bedford then. How long ago? Eleven months. Eleven years. However long, it feels more distant. He himself driven out of Paris exactly one year earlier by the boredom of the prospect of staying. The city of light in drab shadows, day by day graying of the sky threatening deluge but invariably satisfied with a damp mist sprayed against tourist and Parisian alike by the hard slashing wind. A city with five weeks of summer—not enough for a Columbia-educated New Yorker who may know nothing else but who knows that summer should not begin on the twenty-first of August and end with the twist of September into October. Before Thanksgiving, he is back in New York, a refugee from that long monotonous darkness that descends on Paris each afternoon, embracing the city in some deep pointillist fog. Home with his mother's portable typewriter and a thick pile of pages he has managed to write.

Home to the old people who, even as winter approaches, sit bundled like aging mannequins on the green benches which line the walks. Fifteen years earlier, they would curse at him and his friends for playing on the grass, that green scar of socialist longing for the riches they had been promised. There are few children in the co-op now. Those that he sees are careful not to walk on the grass. He studies them again, the same faces, only older, some toothless, others seemingly collapsed into gumlessness, eyes sunken not into protest but into the remembered habit of protest. False bluster.

Politics worn like eye shadow. Sometimes, he can understand why his father turned from them in disgust. But he tells himself that these are the people he should be writing about. Wars so ancient and dead that in another decade it will take a budding Schliermann to find their Helen. Ritualized beliefs thrust against other ritualized beliefs. In the elevator, the old anarchist who knew Trotsky stands in one corner, an almost-as-old party stalwart huddled against the yellow metal wall of the other corner. They do not speak to each other. A habitual sneer solidifies the thin face of the party stalwart—a face, Michael decides, frightened first by God's exit from Vilna and then by truth dropping like honey from the lips of those who modestly assured him they were his equals, not his betters. Equals armed with the proper methodology. The proper methodology was always important. Souls pierced by words, like St. Sebastian pierced by arrows. Faces caged by imminent deaths. Only death will break the rigor of belief. Even in elevators, truth engulfs them. Standing between these two old men for whom words are youth, he waits for a cry from their past. Hears nothing except their heavy breathing. Wanting discipline, he will listen to that, too. Wanting belief, he will be as patient with them as a mother is with a sickly child. Dying bodies, living words. He finds that attractive. A belief that withers, leaving nothing but the words in which it has been clothed, like the memory of snow in some distant countryside.

The party stalwart barely acknowledges his greeting when he enters the elevator. He remembers how, when he was a junior at Columbia, the party stalwart once cornered him in front of the mailboxes. The middle of winter and the old man wearing a yellow sport shirt open at the neck, plebian chic demanding recognition. Why the party stalwart sought him out he would never know. "So how can the Soviet Union be anti-Semitic?" he suddenly asks Michael. "In the Soviet Union, anti-Semitism is a crime. Listen to me. I've read the Soviet Constitution." And then angrily walks away, justified before God and man.

Why hadn't he laughed then? Because he couldn't. Just as he couldn't laugh now. His glance simply shifts from one of the old men to the other. They stand, mute in the corners of the elevator, murdering each other in their minds. Hidden passages leading them back to days when the world was young and possibilities abounded. Garment workers, furriers, butchers from Warsaw, painters from Odessa—each seeking an alley through memory, time leading them like birds in flight. As he steps off the elevator, his mind blesses them

all, blesses their shrivelled meanness, blesses the two old men he is leaving, now staring into the space he has left empty between them, symbiosis of death and desire on the way to the top floor. "If it wasn't them," he tells his father in a moment of confessional weakness, "it would be some fat Buddha in Oregon."

Haunted by their past, he spies his own as he steps out of the elevator. He has not seen her since his return from Paris two and a half years earlier. In fact, he has not seen her since she went off to Texas to do graduate work in something or other. He forgets what. Probably he never knew. But now she is leaning against the door of his apartment, waiting expectantly, her face framed by the harsh neon of the hallway. A thin shiver of excitement—the kind of prelude he recalls from nights in Paris when he would roam the small clubs and student cafés, betting himself for or against his ability to persuade some unknown woman—spins through his body. No odds necessary with Miriam, just the remembered taste of those weekend nights when he was still thirteen and she would put his sisters to bed and then he would lie next to her, eyes fastened on the garish axe murders and thick streams of blood on the television screen. He lies as still as he can, knowing that, oversized thirteen-year-old or not, the night will bring visions following her departure which will end only when the voice within cries out, "It's not real! It's the other that's real!" A decade turned over. Initiations re-lived. Memory demanding that he acknowledge what she had done for him.

And he remembers the afternoons following the nights, when he would roam the neighborhood searching for her, rehearsing in his mind what he would say if he chanced upon her on his way to fill a prescription for a mother long since beyond the comfort or illusion prescriptions might bring. Miriam just seventeen then. And already he towers above her, four years her junior and light-years removed from all that she seems to know and he doesn't. And it is that oval face, smiling against the clear August afternoon, that he calls up. Not beautiful but striking in its open embrace of the world, like a portrait of a woman sheltered by nothing but the deep blue of the necessary sky. She used to tell him that she should be clothed in peacock feathers, at seventeen already impatient with aging parents still tied down to the simple pieties of the garment center and equally impatient with the education she was finishing at whatever one of the high schools for "gifted" children the city fathers had allowed her to attend.

And that is still the Miriam he wants. Poised against the clear blue summer sky, about to embark for Reed or Bard or Antioch and long since beyond what they might teach her. Even more vivid than this woman of close to thirty who leans against the door of his apartment, dressed in a sky-blue skirt and a white peasant blouse, as if she had stepped out of some recolored print of Dovzhenko's *Earth*. Another illusion for the old people who ride up and down on the elevator, clawing for a piece of each other's dreams.

But Miriam has dressed for him. "I'm not crazy," she says. "I'm just home for good. Michael, this is no place for crazies. Too much competition." And she laughs, the first time he hears the metallic sound. Then she beckons him on with the curled index finger of her right hand. "Want to fuck your ex-sitter?"

"You sat for the twins," he answers. "And they're still in California." But he enjoys the thought of it, a raunchy note even for a New York in which nothing is forbidden. Flushed with excitement, he feels as if all past affairs had been preparatory exercises meant to do no more than feed him a sense of time passing, like those grainy American movies from the forties the French were so fond of. He wants her now, even more than he wanted her then. They embrace, the dark floral smell of the perfume she wears spinning him back in time to those nights when she would press him to her body so that the smell of her and the rise of her well-shaped tits would reach past whatever horror she had selected for them to watch on television. It was as if she had folded him into the security of her body. He had no fear that the twins might awake and spy out what they were doing or that his parents would suddenly appear in the doorway of the room, having decided to come home early from the play or party or concert or dinner with friends they pursued so avidly before time played itself out. Miriam as guardian. Miriam as guarantor. Later, after she had returned to her own parents' apartment six floors below, he would lie awake in bed, afraid to sleep and face the inevitable nightmare. And he would listen to his mother's cancer-ravaged voice from the bedroom next door, "It's a city that makes dying easier. That's why. Not for you to question. Not you. Not the children. We live *here!* *Here!*"

He couldn't understand it then. He couldn't understand how New York made anything easier. But he understood it now. His mother holding on to the city so fiercely during those final three years because she understood that if death was inexorable then New York was simply a way of commenting on what death was taking.

Where nothing was natural, nothing was unnatural either. His mother would not have died so defiantly if his father had taken her off to Bedford. In New York, it was acceptable to go from party to party, play to play, dinner to dinner—and all the time her body being eaten away at by something demanding and relentless and uncompromising. It was a source of vanity for his mother, dying as she had lived, holding on to a hard, simple rage. All her life, like so many people living in the co-op, she had been an injustice collector. *Her* poetry, *her* politics, *her* Left, *her* New York—invectives slashing against time. Accusation and betrayal, plot and counterplot—and the new enemy, the cancer, on whom to place the world and its burdens.

Was that to be his fate, too? As the apartment and the Royal portable were now his. Was he, too, destined to die bitterly, overwhelmed by absence, refusing rabbis and prayers and hospitals? No solace allowed! Like a slogan from those dead times. Why, then, can't he leave the old wars and the old people to each other? Why listen to the old anarchist with skin like rice paper or the party stalwart who believes, *believes*, that the Soviets cannot be anti-Semitic because it is forbidden by their constitution?

Embracing past and present, he leans now across Miriam and embraces the flesh and perfume he knows so well. He opens the door with his key. He is starting over in New York. He points inside, gently pushes her to where she willingly goes. Then he kicks the door closed behind him, as her hands grab his shoulders and her lips find his neck. He stands holding her, relishing the ease with which he can slip into the past and wait for the remembered gestures to spring loose the child in his soul.

Money in the bank and dollars on the table. For his father anyway. Lost dreams of childhood wrapped in a language of bitter retribution. And who understood the lure of money better than a good union man? Who could better describe the old men of his own time, sitting in the sun on Knox Place? The war ended, and the talk of socialism, of capitalism's inevitable decline, of Tito's split with Stalin—bad for the millennial coming, which they still await in 1950 with sour breath held thick to hope—bad for the struggle of Negroes (not yet blacks in those still-universalist days), bad for Polish syndicalists, one-eyed folksingers, Irish seamen who paid dues *both* to the NMU and the IWW, unemployed machinists expelled from the

future halls of power by excessive political zeal. Infantile leftism. All diseases named, described, catalogued—warning labels on every shelf. “You and your mother, you weren’t the only dreamers,” his father tells him. “Those old men could make your mother seem practical. I swear it.”

American fantasies. Like fucking the watcher over your childhood. Accuracy demands. Miriam had been the twins’ sitter. He had been free to come and go as he pleased. Only not to be burdened, as his mother put it, by responsibility for his sisters. Sometimes, he thinks his mother sensed what he and Miriam did after the twins were put to bed. Maybe that was why they never came home early. He would lie on the rug from Pakistan with the deep colors blending into one another and he would close his eyes and concentrate mind and body limp so that he could feel precisely what Miriam promised he would feel. Her hands playing his body, he lies still and passive. At thirteen, he still believes it is different in the rest of America. Not with your sisters’ sitter. Not in the rest of America.

“Nice girls don’t,” she says.

He slaps at his pillow, balances on an elbow, studies her face. Cossacks sweep through the shtetls of Eastern Europe. Melding of bloods in a nasty variation of the universalist dream. He leans down, kisses her neck. “Don’t what?”

“Make love to other nice girls.”

“Is that what they don’t do?” He lies down, staring again at the dark blue of the ceiling. He has spent hours carefully painting it the right shade of blue. Midnight blue. He has taken the ceiling for his own. His mother always insisted on white ceilings. To lighten the apartment. Now that the apartment is his, he will paint each ceiling in each room a different color. His arm reaches across Miriam’s body for the cigarettes on the night table next to the red bowl. He sits up in bed. He will tell his father he does not want the bowl, ask him to take it. He lets the cigarette dangle from his lips, examines the book of matches. Is he interested in finding a well-paying job, a solid career? Tool and die making.

“No,” Miriam says, “they don’t.”

“It’s 1986, Miriam,” he says. “New York in 1986. Everything goes.”

“Even for nice girls?”

He lights the cigarette, draws deeply on it. He should stop

smoking. Only he likes to watch the smoke disappear into the ceiling. "Especially for nice girls," he says. "This is New York."

Where what is ultimately forbidden is only the idea of the forbidden. So that now is merely the continuation of the way she used to pull him down to the rug with the dark reds and oranges and browns ("Pakistan! Those bastards!" his mother screams the night his father and he maneuver it into the elevator and then into the apartment) and he taught himself to keep his body still and his mind absolutely receptive with anticipation and let Miriam disappear into the death he knows is coming for his mother. "Michael," Miriam whispers. "Michael Gordon."

And now the metallic clicking giving way in his mind to the pleasure-filled expectancy which had once served to keep the world at a distance. "All you have to do is call, Michael. I'll be there. Promise."

Illusions pass into the solid presence. His mother died, not Miriam. Now he pushes her back into the mattress and feels her fingers dig into his shoulders and presses his lips to the still-tart taste of the Granny Smith apple. Pushing against memories. Perhaps a moment like this.

"What else?" he hears her whisper.

A sudden chill brushes the air. He feels himself suspended in time. Pauses. "Don't you want to?" he asks, furious to uncover the thirteen-year-old beggar once again in his voice.

"Bisexual," she giggles. Then the giggle spins into the metallic laugh. "Oh, Michael, it's not as crazy as it sounds."

"Not here," he says, and begins to work his time and her body. "Not in New York." Caught up in the love-making, he cannot even remember whether the metallic sound is still coming from Miriam.

Elizabeth Dalton

KAFKA AS SAINT

The centennial anniversary of the birth of Franz Kafka in 1883 seems to have provoked a growth spurt in an already immense bibliography. A number of new critical and biographical works have appeared in the last four or five years, older works have been reprinted, more of the correspondence has been published. The earliest criticism of Kafka featured a lively debate about the meaning of his work and even about his status as a writer. But although he was once so strange and incomprehensible, Kafka now seems familiar: he and his characters are the emblematic modern antiheroes, and everything in our lives, from a boring meeting to the nuclear arms race, has become "Kafkaesque." The critics have come to regard Kafka as being on our side against the irrationality of the world; he is our representative and champion.

However, there have been other views of Kafka, some quite at odds with the positive opinion that prevails now. In an incisive little book first published in German in 1951, Günther Anders accused Kafka of acquiescent nihilism: "He is a realist of the dehumanized world, but also its exalter." He warned against the danger of a cult, saying "It is not Kafka's works that must be destroyed, but their dangerous fascination. The severest treatment which we should inflict on Kafka would be perhaps to understand him so well that his appeal is destroyed."

No one, of course, was more ambivalent toward his work than Kafka himself, or more doubtful of his right to literary fame. At times he seemed to claim the central place we now accord him, as when he wrote in his journal, "I represent the negative elements of my age." Yet he published only a fraction of his work and, as we know, instructed Max Brod to destroy the rest after his death. He feared the "negative elements" he dealt with, as though they did indeed have the dangerous powers attributed to them by Günther Anders.

Some of the most influential recent criticism of Kafka, however, almost entirely suppresses this idea of something equivocal or morally dangerous in his work. Max Brod's view of his friend as a religious writer has come back; there seems to be not only a Kafka cult, as Anders feared, but a movement for his elevation to sainthood.

The last volume of the correspondence to be published, *Letters to Ottla and the Family*, has strengthened Brod's "pietistic" view of Kafka (the word is Walter Benjamin's) by association with the heroism of his sister. In 1942 Ottla divorced her gentile husband in order to protect him and their daughters, was sent to Theresienstadt, and then volunteered to accompany a children's transport to Auschwitz, where she died. "Evidently," wrote one reviewer, "she shared some of her brother's saintliness." It would seem, however, that if anyone had saintliness to share, it was Ottla herself.

Elias Canetti's study of Kafka's letters to Felice Bauer, *Kafka's Other Trial*, gives us a Kafka whose life and work are an attack on power and an evasion of it. Of *The Castle* Canetti writes:

No author ever wrote a clearer attack on subjection to the superior, whether one views the latter as a higher power or as a merely terrestrial one. For all sovereignty has here become one, and is shown to be abominable.

Kafka's physical thinness, according to Canetti, is a withdrawal from and an attack on power, and so is his creation of small animals.

Since he abominated violence, but did not credit himself with the strength to combat it, he enlarged the distance between the strong entity and himself by becoming smaller and smaller in relation to it. Through this shrinkage he gained two advantages: he evaded the threat by becoming too diminutive for it, and he freed himself from all exceptionable means of violence: the small animals into which he liked to transform himself were harmless ones.

Thus Kafka's ambiguous attitude toward his compelling images of power becomes unequivocal: he abominates violence, attacks power, and identifies himself with small harmless creatures. A Franciscan Franz emerges here, a gentle, saintly creature like the figure in Brod's biography. Yet a passage from a sketch entitled "Memoirs of the Kalda Railroad," cited later in the same discussion by Canetti himself, suggests that Kafka's feelings about power and powerlessness were darker and more complicated than this:

As for the rats that sometimes attacked my provisions, my long knife sufficed to deal with them. . . . I spitted one of these rats on the point of my knife and held it before me at eye level against

the wall. . . . Hanging against the wall in front of me in its final agony, it rigidly stretched out its claws in what seemed to be an unnatural way; they were like small hands reaching out to you.

If the author is identified with one party here, it is not with the rat but with the first-person narrator, the “I” who spears the rat and contemplates its “final agony” in a strangely detached tone.

Erich Heller, in his introduction to *Letters to Felice*, presents a vision of Kafka as idealized as Canetti’s. Heller rejects vehemently any psychoanalytic attempt to understand this agonizingly ambivalent courtship:

In this century it is certainly too much to expect that these letters will inspire some readers to study the poetry of the minnesingers rather than to recite Freudian theorems. . . .

For explanation he alludes instead to Kafka’s references to having received a “command” to torment himself, which Heller evidently means for the reader to take quite literally:

A command from heaven: to feel this in a world that serves its citizens with very different, and apparently more dependable, information about the discomfort of their souls—might this not justify a little the misfortune of this love: Even, perhaps, justify the misery that Kafka must have caused Felice?

Here Kafka has become a medieval minnesinger and saint, directly in touch with heaven, which has licensed him to torture Felice, a mere ordinary human being.

In Heller’s own book on Kafka, having rejected psychoanalysis as reductive, he imposes everywhere a philosophical interpretation based on Schopenhauer. Thus the sin that gives rise to the sense of guilt in Kafka is once and for all explained:

. . . the first and fundamental design of “The Judgment” or “The Metamorphosis” or “In the Penal Colony” is unequivocally Schopenhauerian: to be an individual is a culpable encroachment upon the peace of nonbeing, or at least of not being an individual.

Although philosophical elements are certainly present in his work, Kafka is not exactly a philosophical writer—he is too tightly

caught in the actual minutiae of experience. It is surely wrong to attribute his view of the world, especially “unequivocally,” to anything so abstract and ordered as a philosophical system. The guilt that weighs on the novels and stories like a physical pressure, a darkening of the light and thickening of the air, can hardly be explained by so universal and abstract a sin as “encroachment upon the peace of nonbeing.” Kafka’s work does suggest a view of the human condition, but in the form of images and emotions rather than a coherent philosophy. The primary effect, especially of the most successful works, is of a claustal subjectivity, an obsessional imprisonment in a world of individual thought and feeling from which there is no escape into philosophy.

Monolithic philosophical explanations seem particularly inappropriate for a writer such as Kafka, who compels our interest not only by his general sense of life but by the brilliant strangeness of its details. These oddly vivid images torment and baffle us with their enigmatic intimations of meaning, like fragments of our own dreams. They are left untouched by philosophical explanations, which seem to float at a considerable distance above them. Why, for instance, do three bearded lodgers install themselves in the Samsa household? Why are the father’s underdrawers soiled in “The Judgment”? Why is the Harrow made of glass in “In the Penal Colony”? Heller tells us it is not only futile but wrong to ask the meaning of these details. The point is that they have no meaning: Kafka is writing about the disinherited modern world, where things happen without meaning.

But this answer is not satisfying. These bizarre details, so meticulously recorded, are not meaningless. On the contrary. Kafka’s images are incomprehensible because they are *too full* of meaning. We aren’t used to dealing with so much significance: the interpretive capacity is overwhelmed and confused by this fictional world in which nothing is innocent or accidental. It is a representation not of the external world, where events seem at times so random or so remote from our interests that they have no special “meaning” for us, but rather of the internal world, where nothing is without meaning, although the meaning may be unknown.

Heller characterizes the interest in meaning as “boorish curiosity in the company of tragic subtleties!” We are left to our bafflement, to content ourselves with the clichéd figure of the disinherited modern man lost in the corridors of bureaucratic power, or the patron saint of modern alienation. This empty vocabulary does

serve a purpose, however. It makes sense of Kafka, it makes him palatable, while concealing the actuality, brutal and intimate, of the stories. It helps us forget the way it feels to read them. "Disinheritance" and "alienation" suggest rather abstract work of little emotional power. In fact Kafka's fiction evokes powerful feelings—not only of loneliness and sadness but often of terror and disgust. Stories such as "The Metamorphosis" or "In the Penal Colony" or "Jackals and Arabs" are threatening, nauseating, invasive. The experience they present seems utterly new and unknown and yet familiar and somehow shameful, as though merely by reading one has been led into some guilty admission.

Kafka's great originality is not, obviously, his presentation of the ideas of Schopenhauer, but something entirely different. He wrote in his journal, "My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background." He discovered a way of representing that inner life in art more directly than ever before. The "inner life"—of dream images, wishes and fears, memories and fantasies, sexual preoccupations—is always present in literature, even behind the most solid and circumstantial realism or the most objective and classical style. In Kafka's work, however, it is not really behind anything; it is itself the subject. Only in myth and fairy tale do we find elsewhere such cruel and luminous images from the unconscious, but with Kafka they acquire a biting edge of modern knowingness.

What Kafka meant by "inner life" is very close to Freud's conception of unconscious and preconscious mental life. Kafka wanted not to analyze this world but only to explore and dramatize it, to express its power. How deliberately did he enter the realm of the unconscious? In the journal entry for the morning after he completed "The Judgment," he wrote "thoughts about Freud, of course." Of course: he was a sophisticated modern intellectual; he read Freud and made use in his own way of what he read. Years later in a letter to Milena Jesenska he wrote of the therapeutic side of psychoanalysis that it was "a hopeless error" (a skepticism Freud also expressed in his darker moments). It is by definition impossible that Kafka understood fully the unconscious material that floated up into his thoughts and his work. His preoccupation with it does not imply rational understanding; it may even imply the contrary.

He was trapped and paralyzed in this fascination with his inner world. He could not marry and found a family, could not leave home, sometimes could not sleep or eat, and worst of all, often could

not write. He felt that the commerce with his own “dark powers” was both forbidden and essential to his writing. In a letter to Max Brod, he wrote:

Writing is a sweet and wonderful reward, but for what? In the night it became clear to me, as clear as a child’s lesson book, that it is the reward for serving the devil. This descent to the dark powers, this unshackling of spirits bound by nature, these dubious embraces and whatever else may take place in the nether parts which the higher parts no longer know, when one writes one’s stories in the sunshine. Perhaps there are other forms of writing, but I know only this kind; at night, when fear keeps me from sleeping, I know only this kind. And the diabolic element in it seems very clear to me.

The campaign to sanctify the writer of this passage, which began with Brod and has continued ever since, might convince us that he didn’t really mean all this about dark powers, dubious embraces, and nether parts. Perhaps it was all ironic. But the cleverest irony may be to say exactly what one means.

Heller, Canetti, and Brod are unanimous in their rejection of psychoanalysis, doubtless sensing that it might alter the rather sentimental icon they have created. Canetti writes, “Kafka’s sovereign perspective on psychoanalysis ought to have helped critics detach from its constricting domain his own person at least.” As though a sovereign perspective on the laws of gravity would permit one to walk on air.

The attempt to misunderstand Kafka, to deny the subjective and unconscious elements in his work, is nowhere clearer than in the effort to transform the nightmarish horror and perverse sexuality of “In the Penal Colony” entirely into the elements of a philosophical conte. The story concerns an explorer who visits a penal colony dominated by a torture machine, a monstrous contraption, invented by the former Commandant, that writes on his body with needles the commandment broken by the victim, then after hours of torture culminating in a moment of “enlightenment,” pierces him through and drops him into a waste pit. The officer who operates the machine describes this process enthusiastically as he prepares the machine to execute a prisoner. When the explorer expresses his opposition to such methods, the officer lies down on the machine himself and is executed. The explorer then leaves the colony.

Heller’s comments on this story are worth quoting in part:

. . . there often appears in Kafka's works the reflection of a transcendent light on the faces of those about to be freed from their guilty individual state. While Schopenhauer is fond of thus interpreting the peace that shows in the features of the dead, with Kafka it sometimes seems that the lifting of the curse of individuation is welcomed ecstatically, that the victim himself rejoices in the fulfillment of the Law exacting the supreme penalty for the sin against the original all-oneness. It is as if many a terrible dying described by Kafka were perverse love-deaths, partaking of the rapture of a final reunion after the sorrows of a long deprivation. . . . It might have been once again upon the instruction of Schopenhauer himself that the face of the officer who eventually does "get under the Harrow" himself . . . shows no sign of the "promised redemption." . . . Upon the instruction of Schopenhauer: for the philosopher abhorred suicide as a means of overcoming individual existence, seeing it not as self-conquest but . . . as a desperate, hysterical, and perverse self-assertion — the precise characterization of the officer's self-execution.

This account of the story obscures as much as it illuminates. A philosophical skeleton is exposed, but in the process the story is eviscerated. Why must the curse of individuation be lifted so sadistically, with hours of agonizing torture described in minute detail? Wouldn't a thunderbolt do as well? What is distinctively Kafkaesque in this situation, what it *feels* like to wish for annihilation, is left out. And so is the response evoked by the story. Why does the reader experience a queasy excitement at the working out of this philosophical parable, a painful mixture of curiosity and disgust not unlike the sensations that attended childhood research into certain forbidden subjects? Kafka's own comment on "In the Penal Colony" is quite succinct: in a letter he referred to it as "my filthy story."

"In the Penal Colony" has received rather less critical attention than "The Metamorphosis" and "The Judgment," perhaps because of its unusual gruesomeness. Another problem also presents itself, leading to a tempting but anachronistic misreading in terms of history. The penal colony seems a grimly ironic forecast of the concentration camps, where Ottla and Kafka's two other sisters died and where his own life probably would have ended had he not died earlier. But "In the Penal Colony" is not about a concentration camp; it is about the place where concentration camps were invented.

The penal colony is a place in the mind, that part of the mind

concerned with transgression and punishment. Psychoanalysis has a name for this place, which is not exactly a place but a way of functioning. It is the unconscious, and more particularly the superego. In this superego, however, the wish to punish and the need to suffer are out of control. Here an obsession with authority and a puritanical hatred of sin are linked with exciting fantasies of torture, of a body forced to yield up its last secrets with stifled screams. The body turns out finally to be that of the torturer himself.

The personnel of the story—the officer and the explorer, the condemned man and the soldier—are all men, all apparently rather young. They are “characters” only in a special and limited sense. Like all of Kafka’s human beings, they lack the complex and contradictory qualities of persons in real life or even in realistic fiction. Rather, they have the bright flatness of the figures in dreams. They represent not whole persons, but aspects of a single conflicted self.

The story can be understood, then, as dramatizing an internal struggle among parts of a personality. Indeed, the three principal figures—the explorer, the officer (of whom the soldier seems mainly an agent), and the condemned man—resemble in some respects the three parts of Freud’s topographical conception of the mind.

The explorer is the central character, from whose perspective the events of the story are seen and who must make a decision about them. A visitor to the colony, he is horrified by its practices, yet also fascinated, strangely silent, obscurely implicated. He is a kind of ego figure, a rational social self that moves in the outside world as well as in this inner world of suffering and punishment.

The most striking figure in the story is the officer. A fanatical disciplinarian, he is like a superego gone berserk, at once terrifying and absurd in his rapt devotion to the refinements of torture, his willing slavery to the dictates of the Old Commandant, his indifference to the realities of history and change. When the explorer observes that the uniforms of the colony are too heavy for the tropics, the officer replies, “But they mean home to us: we don’t want to forget about home.” The superego itself, like a rigid, inhibiting uniform, reminds us of home, of childhood and the arbitrary prohibitions of the parents, utterly at odds with the requirements of adult life, yet homelike, familiar, something to be stubbornly maintained against the threat of some still more painful inner chaos.

The other significant character is the condemned man, “a stupid-looking wide-mouthed creature” who fell asleep on sentry duty. When his captain, another devotee of military punctilio like

the officer, lashed him across the face with a whip, the condemned man threatened to eat him alive. This encounter suggests the unruly id rebelling against an equally savage superego. In his bestial physicality, the condemned man is associated with instinctual drives. His needs, pleasures, and expressive acts are of the most primitive, oral kind, suggesting the lowest level of development. He is "wide-mouthed," he vomits, he laps rice pap. His aggression too is primitive and oral: he threatens to eat his master alive. Faced with the machine, however, he becomes totally passive, "like a submissive dog," suggesting that this primitive sadism can easily turn to masochism.

The most impressive feature of the story is the torture machine. It is one of Kafka's most brilliant conceits, along with the trial, the castle, and the insect of "The Metamorphosis." But what is the machine? It is, of course, an instrument of torture, in one sense quite realistic, only an exaggeration of such instruments of judicial torture as the rack and the wheel. But it is also a metaphor, and like all great metaphors it is "overdetermined," expressing a number of associated ideas.

One meaning of the machine is perfectly explicit: it is the machinery of guilt, by which guilt is both experienced and punished. Two aspects or meanings of guilt are here conflated: the objective or judicial state of culpability, and the emotion, the subjective state of suffering and self-condemnation. Which is to say that guilt is in itself a punishment. This mad machine shows us how the superego works.

According to the officer, the machine was invented by the Old Commandant; in fact, "the whole penal colony is his work," just as in Freud's scheme the superego is founded on the commands and prohibitions of the father. The machine once had to be set by hand, although it now works by itself—just as the superego once had to be started going "by hand," so to speak, by the parent, and is then established as an institution within the personality, independent of external influence. Once this structure is firmly established, it is difficult to change. Although the Old Commandant has died and has been replaced by a new Commandant with more humane notions, the new man has been unable to alter anything.

The Old Commandant left behind his drawings for the design and operation of the machine, and they are the officer's most treasured possession. At this point in the story even the explorer, who has maintained until now an attitude of neutral skepticism, seems impressed. "Did he combine everything in himself, then?

Was he soldier, judge, mechanic, chemist and draughtsman?" he asks. This legendary figure who combines all talents and occupations is of course the heroic father of childhood, whose mythic aura is never entirely dispelled. The "designs" he leaves behind continue to control the workings of the superego and immortalize his influence in the structure of personality.

The broken commandment to be inscribed on the body of the soldier is "Honor Thy Superiors." The story tells us that the son cannot help but do this — if not through obedience then through the suffering and guilt that accompany disobedience. The prisoner does not know his sentence, nor even that he has been sentenced, and thus has no chance to defend himself. The officer's guiding principle is, "Guilt is never to be doubted." This is the experience of neurotic guilt: suffering grotesquely disproportionate to an unknown crime, a mysterious sentence impossible to mitigate or even understand.

The officer shows the explorer the Old Commandant's designs, but the explorer can see only an unintelligible labyrinth of lines. "I can't make it out," he says, and the officer agrees that "It's no calligraphy for school children. . . . Of course the script can't be a simple one; it's not supposed to kill a man straight off." The prohibitions and punishments of the superego are not, after all, rationally intelligible.

And guilt does not in fact "kill a man straight off." It is a slow torture; the ordeal on the machine may represent a lifetime. But eventually there is a turning point. Around the sixth hour occurs the climax of the torture, the moment of "enlightenment," which Heller explains as "the lifting of the curse of individuation."

"Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. To be sure, that is a hard task; he needs six hours to accomplish it. By that time the Harrow has pierced him quite through and casts him into the pit. . . ."

This "enlightenment" must be the moment when the ego finally gives up the struggle with the superego and abandons itself to guilt and self-punishment. The victim then "understands" his sentence — not with his rational intelligence but with his suffering.

But why does the officer present this awful realization as he does? To him it seems not the most terrible point of an agonizing ordeal, but a moment so tempting that he finally offers his own body to the Harrow. The officer's attitude makes it clear that the torture machine, and indeed the whole penal colony, embodies a powerful masochistic fantasy. The workings of the machine dramatize what Freud calls "moral masochism," and show how closely it is related to the more obviously erotic perversion.

The moral masochist, who has a sadistic conscience, continually seeks punishment, either from the outside world or within himself in the form of guilt. Although this is a familiar pattern in life and in literature, it's difficult to see how the superego's sadism toward the ego could be pleasurable, even in an unconscious way. But in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud tells us of the superego:

. . . [it] is as much a representative of the id as of the external world. It came into being through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the id's libidinal impulses—namely, the two parents. In this process the relation to those objects was desexualized. . . .

In moral masochism, however, "morality becomes sexualized once more, the Oedipus-complex is revived and the way is opened for a regression from morality to the Oedipus complex." That is, the moral masochist unknowingly seeks in the feeling of guilt the libidinal gratifications of the Oedipus complex.

The torture fantasy is a graphic illustration of this regression. For the guilt machine is also a sexual image: the details of its operation suggest an exciting and terrifying act containing the most significant motifs of infantile sexuality.

That is, the machine, in its overdetermined symbolism, is the expression of a number of unconscious ideas. At one level the machine represents the workings of guilt, a partly conscious phenomenon in the moral life of the adult. But viewed from a slightly different angle, the machine also reveals the unconscious ideas enacted in the conscious phenomenon, the sources of the adult's self-inflicted moral pain in the psychosexual experience of the child. Thus the torture machine contains and dramatizes a whole psychological history, both past and present, cause and effect, in a single complex and self-confirming expression.

When the machine is looked at again, this time with more attention to its actual structure and function, the sexual fantasy at the root of the moral suffering begins to emerge. The “remarkable piece of apparatus” looms up in the first line of the story. Although its structure is bedded deep in the earth, its upper parts rise high in the air, so that the officer must climb a ladder to inspect them. He is in awe of this gigantic structure. “‘A pity you never met the Old Commandant!’” he says. “‘. . . Here stands his apparatus before us. It consists, as you see, of three parts.’” The enormous three-part apparatus is the son’s heroic image of the father’s genitals. Of the three parts, the most prominent is “this one here in the middle that moves up and down.” When the officer climbs down after inspecting the machine’s upper parts, he “looked uncommonly limp.” As who would not in comparison with this magnificent equipment?

The explorer’s response to the machine is interesting. Earlier we are told, “The explorer did not much care about the apparatus and walked up and down behind the prisoner with almost visible indifference.” We don’t need psychoanalysis to tell us what such conspicuous lack of interest means. Later, when the officer describes the Harrow, the explorer responds again with apparent indifference:

“The Harrow?” asked the explorer. He had not been listening very attentively, the glare of the sun in the shadeless valley was altogether too strong, it was difficult to collect one’s thoughts.

Once again the explorer cannot quite pay attention. The light is too bright, as if so clear a vision of the Harrow disorients him, not because it is uninteresting, but on the contrary because it is *too* interesting.

The reader shares the explorer’s difficulty in a way. Although the apparatus is minutely described, it is actually rather hard to visualize. But the ambiguousness of its structure enriches its symbolic and associative possibilities, which converge in a matrix of related meanings. The lower part of the machine, where the condemned man is laid, is called the Bed. The upper part, called the Designer, contains a worn cogwheel; therefore the machine “creaks a lot when it’s working.” Although viewed as a whole the machine suggests the father’s genitals, its separate parts also evoke the creaking parental bed.

That significant bed dominates the sexual imagination of childhood. Children are usually prevented from observing the parents in

intercourse. But they are specially invited to watch the Harrow in action; in fact, it is made of glass just so that everyone can see. Thus the scene on the Harrow gratifies the wish to see the “primal scene,” the fantasy of parental intercourse that dramatizes the child’s Oedipal wishes and fears. Here the act that is usually the most private becomes a “performance,” a theatrical event with spectators: “Once contact is made the steel ribbon stiffens immediately into a rigid band. And then the performance begins.” The officer explains that “the shape of the Harrow corresponds to the human form: here is the harrow for the torso, here are the harrows for the legs. For the head there is only this one small spike.” That is, the Harrow is like another body over the body of the condemned man—a body made of needles and spikes. Obviously the sexual act is viewed here with fear and revulsion.

The imagery not only dramatizes this revulsion, but suggests its source. Although the officer thinks the machine is marvelous, even he is troubled by one problem: “Its one drawback is that it gets so messy.” He goes on:

“Each long needle has a short one beside it. The long needle does the writing, and the short needle sprays a jet of water to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear. Blood and water together are then conducted here through small runnels into this main runnel and down a waste pipe into the pit.”

The two needles suggest the two functions of the penis—sexual penetration and urination—while the runnels and waste pipe plainly allude to excretion. To illustrate the working of the system, the officer holds his hands under the pipe, and at this point the explorer finally recoils. In all the description of torture, only this detail of the waste pipe rouses him to an overt response of horror. In a passage often misread to imply feminine inferiority, Freud writes, “the position of the genitals—*inter urinas et faeces*—remains the decisive and unchangeable factor. One might say here, varying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon’s, ‘Anatomy is destiny.’” Like Blake and Yeats, Freud believed that the anatomical association of sexual and excretory functions gives to sexuality its problematic character. The explorer seems to agree. The condemned man expresses his opinion on the subject when he vomits all over the machine.

The blood conveyed by the waste pipe does suggest a more specifically feminine association, and so does the “specially prepared

cotton wool” that staunches the bleeding. The fact that women bleed from the genital, with its disturbing suggestion of the vagina as a wound, arouses the fear of castration during intercourse. All of these disgusting and frightening ideas surrounding sex culminate in the “enlightenment,” an image of orgasm as annihilation: the victim’s entire body is “pierced quite through” by the Harrow, with a spike driven through his head.

This is a spectacular example of what Freud calls the sadomasochistic primal scene, the child’s misunderstanding of intercourse as a struggle in which the father injures the mother. In this conception, sexual excitement becomes dominated by ideas of cruelty and violence. But the scene in the penal colony has taken still another turn. The masochistic victim here is not a woman but a man. The fantasy has a plainly homosexual character: the man is laid face down on the Bed, bound and gagged, his body penetrated from behind over a period of hours until the orgasmic moment of enlightenment and death.

The apparatus that carries out this homosexual rape unites the grandeur of the paternal phallus with patriarchal moral severity. Hatred for the father—whether a real human father or a mythic figure—is often taken to be at the core of Kafka’s work. This is a bit too simple. In this story we see the other, “negative” half of what Freud calls the “complete Oedipus complex.” That is, the son has erotic as well as hostile feelings for the father, and feminine as well as masculine identifications. This homosexual component is embodied in “In the Penal Colony” with spectacular intensity. But there is considerable resistance against seeing it. (Canetti, for instance, writes, “His struggle with his father was essentially never anything but a struggle against superior power.”) The saintly opponent of violence and paternal tyranny is a more acceptable figure than the creator of a darkly perverse fiction in which paternal violence is erotically exciting.

Why should the Oedipus complex have taken this particular form? Part of the answer is contained in the fantasy itself. In the “positive” Oedipal resolution, the son both identifies and competes with his father. But it might seem impossible to do either with the brutal father of the sadistic primal scene. From a figure such as the Old Commandant, with his terrifying machine for punishing insubordination, the Oedipal threat of castration becomes all too real. It seems preferable to retreat from the competition and instead to submit, to play the passive “feminine” role. The result is a sort of

double bind or logical impasse: the threat of castration is avoided by becoming castrated. Incised and spiked, the body on the Harrow must be not only castrated but pulverized.

In reading the story, the related meanings of the machine are taken in simultaneously. The “harrowing” of guilt is experienced in the form of a masochistic fantasy arousing fear, disgust, and excitement. The fantasy suggests why the person who always feels guilty cannot stop torturing himself: the torture gives him a strange kind of erotic pleasure. The extremity of this fantasy of castration, rape, and death would seem incompatible with pleasure, even of the most obscurely unconscious kind. However, Freud writes that “castration, although it is later disavowed, enters into the content of masochistic phantasies as a precipitate of the phallic stage”; and finally, “even the subject’s destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction.”

Although the Old Commandant, his machine, and his officer still dominate the colony, they no longer have it all their own way. There is a new Commandant who has “a thousand new schemes in his head.” This conflict between old and new regimes suggests an internal conflict between a primitive superego and the more humane conscience of the mature personality. It has also suggested to some critics the difference between Old and New Testaments and the harsh justice of the god of the Jews as opposed to the Christian idea of a god of mercy. The story does evoke religious and philosophical ideas. But the specific connection of the Old Commandant with Jehovah and the new Commandant with the Christian God does not seem quite right. The lingering and minutely described ordeal on the machine does not suggest Old Testament justice, which is swift and massive; flood, plague, the destruction of flocks or first-born. And the victim whose body is pierced to fulfill the designs of an omnipotent father seems closer to Christ in his long ordeal on the cross than to, say, Job. Religious associations are present but in a general and evocative way, as part of a complex of ideas and speculations on the meaning of guilt and the redemptive power of suffering.

The new Commandant is remarkable in this all-male story for associating with ladies. The officer takes a dim view of this and blames the influence of the ladies for the new man’s hostility toward the machine. “Because of this Commandant and the women who influence him, is such a piece of work, the work of a lifetime, to perish?” Is the elaborate structure of a lifetime of guilt and perverse

gratification, a masterpiece of psychopathology, to perish because of new, heterosexual interests?

Heterosexuality is connected in the story with eating. The new Commandant's ladies stuff the condemned man with sugar candy before the execution. The officer, indignant, explains that the proper preparation for the machine is fasting. "He has lived on stinking fish his whole life long and now he has to eat sugar candy!" And indeed, it is after eating the candy that the condemned man vomits. Pleasure offered by ladies, at first tempting, finally arouses disgust.

The conflict in the colony between the ideas of Old and new Commandants now becomes a conflict between the officer and the explorer, and finally within the explorer himself. The officer assumes that the explorer has been favorably impressed with the machine and asks the explorer to intervene on his behalf. The explorer does not want to endorse the torture, yet throughout the officer's monologue he has been mute and evasive, seeming almost mesmerized at times. His internal response has been equally understated, even ambivalent.

The explorer considered the Harrow with a frown. This explanation of the judicial procedure had not satisfied him. He had to remind himself that his was in any case a penal colony where extraordinary measures were needed and that military discipline must be enforced to the last.

The explorer vacillates here, like an ego unsure of its own strength and autonomy and half convinced by the moth-eaten rationalizations of a brutal superego. At last, when the officer requests his help, the explorer must decide: "He did hesitate, for as long as it took to draw one breath. At last, however, he said, as he had to: 'No.'" The ego must finally reject the insane cruelty of the superego.

"Then the time has come," says the officer. He orders the condemned man released, puts into the Designer one of the Old Commandant's inscriptions, and then undresses. Finally he breaks his short sword and throws it into the waste pit. If self-castration is required to show loyalty and submission to the father, then the perfect son is willing to do it.

The officer then lies down on the Bed. The beginning of this self-execution is particularly interesting.

It had been clear enough previously that he understood the machine well, but now it was almost staggering to see how he managed it and how it obeyed him. His hand had only to approach the Harrow for it to rise and sink several times till it was adjusted to the right position for receiving him; he touched only the edge of the Bed and already it was vibrating; the felt gag came to meet his mouth, one could see that the officer was really reluctant to take it but he shrank from it only a moment, soon he submitted and received it.

The familiarity is that of a masturbatory ritual, in which response anticipates stimulus, the Harrow rising to meet the approaching hand. The strange sequence then goes forward, at once homosexual masturbatory fantasy and ordeal of guilt, crime and punishment condensed into a single configuration. The machine works this time without creaking: "Because it was working so silently the machine simply escaped one's attention"—like the workings of the unconscious. And then suddenly a comically horrible eruption occurs. The lid of the Designer springs open and the cogwheels spill out. The machine is breaking down. The Harrow is not writing, but merely jabbing. "This was no exquisite torture such as the officer desired," thinks the explorer, "this was plain murder." The suffering inflicted by the sadistic superego is shown finally to be mere pointless brutality, without transcendent meaning.

The officer chose to have written on his body "BE JUST," an abstract and fundamental commandment on which the superego itself might be founded. But there is no inscription. The explorer looks at the face of the corpse, trying to find the "look of transfiguration" that the officer expected from the moment of enlightenment. But "no sign was visible of the promised redemption." The officer's forehead is pierced through by the great iron spike. The ritual of guilt—an unconscious fantasy of homosexual torture rationalized in religious and moral terms—is exposed for what it is: "plain murder."

The major action of the story is over now. The old order has ended, the new Commandant will presumably institute his reforms. Yet the last two pages, which form a sort of coda, have an ambivalent and unresolved quality that Kafka himself was dissatisfied with. The explorer, accompanied by the condemned man and the soldier, makes his way back to his boat, stopping en route at a teahouse frequented by dock laborers. Under a table is a gravestone with an inscription:

"Here rests the Old Commandant. His adherents, who must now be nameless, have dug this grave and set up this stone. There is a prophecy that after a certain number of years the Commandant will rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait!"

There is an atmosphere of foreboding in the teahouse. Perhaps the Old Commandant really will return from the dead. He has secret adherents, brawny dockworkers with an aura of rough trade about them.

A suggestion of continued conflict remains in the ambiguous last image. The condemned man and the soldier try to jump into the explorer's boat but he prevents them by threatening them with a knotted rope. The break with the penal colony is less than total; something remains behind, left to an uncertain fate if the Old Commandant should somehow return. It is not easy to bury the father or to alter the structure of personality. Once the sadistic superego is established, perhaps it can never be changed. Perhaps the whole story will begin over again one day.

"In the Penal Colony" goes further in the direction of horror than almost any other serious work of literature one can think of; for this reason, some readers find it literally impossible to finish. Many who read to the end do so with the feeling of having somehow been exposed, trapped into some terrible confession about themselves.

Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of the story is not the penal colony, nor the officer, nor even the structure of the torture machine. Rather it is the details of the machine's mode of operation and the quality of the attention devoted to them. That attention is avid, finicky, sensual. The process of the victim's agony is described with the fascination of a connoisseur, the rapt concentration of a masturbator.

The most striking of these details is the gag, "this little gag of felt, which can be easily regulated to go straight into his mouth. It is meant to keep him from screaming and biting his tongue." The officer's fussy solicitude for the victim's tongue is in the interest of preserving his body for the full ordeal on the machine. Every detail must be just right for the achievement of the desired effect — as for a masturbatory fantasy to work. The filthy object stuck in the condemned man's mouth to stifle his screams adds to the horror of torture the excitement and humiliation of an oral rape. "Of course the man is forced to take the felt into his mouth, for otherwise his neck

would be broken by the strap.” The victim is not responsible for what he cannot prevent.

Despite its massive size, the Harrow operates with great precision. “It regulates itself automatically so that the needles barely touch his skin.” The advantage of this refined contact, hardly more than a tickle, is obviously the prolongation of the torture. The wounds are made and deepened only gradually so that the point of no return, the climactic moment of enlightenment, is postponed as long as possible. The machine calibrates sensation as delicately as an expert lover.

The condemned man’s body is laid on cotton wool, which is evidently on a moving belt or roller that turns the body over and over.

“Meanwhile the raw part that has been written on lies on the cotton wool, which is specially prepared to staunch the bleeding and so makes all ready for a new deepening of the script.”

The staunching of wounds, usually a therapeutic measure, serves here not to relieve the victim, but instead to prepare him for a more refined agony. Like the gag and the delicate regulation of the machine, the cotton suggests a perverse tenderness toward the body, an intensity of interest that can only be called erotic.

Another modern convenience of the machine is the electrically heated basin in which rice pap is offered to the victim after the gag is removed, when he no longer has the strength to scream. In a final debasement, the victim laps this babyish food with his tongue, seeming to collaborate in his own annihilation, rather like the “submissive dog” at the beginning of the story. According to the officer, “Not one of them ever misses the chance.” Like the other details of the machine’s operation, this one has a quality of cossetting or pampering the body that suggests pleasure; here, of course, it is used to strengthen the body to experience pain.

These aspects of the torture are perhaps especially frightful because they bring pleasure and pain into uncomfortably close proximity—or rather because they make us acknowledge this disturbing connection in our own minds. This is the terrible truth with which the story confronts us, which makes it both so difficult to read and so compelling. The story taps in us the fascination with the erotic aspect of cruelty, the cruel aspect of Eros. It touches that place where

Eros and death are inextricably connected, which is the most problematic aspect not only of sex but of life itself.

There is a whole category of pornography that deals in cruelty, with bound and gagged male bodies, chains and handcuffs and other appliances not unlike the needles and spikes of the Harrow. Some devotees of this material even like fantasies set in concentration camps. "In The Penal Colony" comes close to this kind of pornography at times; it uses some of the same symbolism and evokes some of the same responses.

Yet it is plainly not pornography. One reason for this is the austerity of the style. Although the story presents the details of the torture with a kind of lingering relish, they are also described with a precision so clinical, bathed in the harsh light of an observation so accurate, that the prurient curiosity aroused by the fantasy is chilled by the style. Thus the style functions not only to display the fantasy, but also to control it.

The central character, the explorer, from whose point of view the story is told, functions in the same way. The explorer's most striking quality is his detachment: "He traveled only as an observer, with no intention at all of altering other people's methods of administering justice." He is not personally involved, at least at the manifest level. His remoteness creates an odd perspective on the events of the story; it functions, like the prose style, in a kind of double way. Because the explorer does not respond with immediate indignation, the officer is permitted to go on at length about the machine and the torture. The fantasy can be fully developed, laid out to view. The reader's curiosity is not inhibited, in fact it is somehow licensed by the explorer's own apparently detached and scientific attitude.

Yet at the same time the explorer's coolness creates a distance between the reader and the fantasy. The very oddness of his response—the inappropriateness of his affect, so to speak—is disconcerting. It undermines the appeal of the fantasy. The disparity between the reserve of his manner and the monstrosity of the situation creates irony and black humor. Irony and humor are not necessarily fatal to pornography, but pornography is generally intended to produce a simple "kinetic" response, to quote Stephen Dedalus. The irony of this story, however, creates a very complex response that includes excitement, revulsion, indignation, and an awareness of historical, religious, and philosophical allusions and parallels.

And although the story is based in large part on a sado-masochistic fantasy, it is not dominated by this fantasy. At one level the wish for self-destruction is indulged, in the person of the officer. But at the ego level where the explicit judgements are made the fantasy is unmasked, its rationalization stripped away, and rejected. Despite the ambiguity of the ending, the structure of the story is not finally that of the fantasy. The explorer leaves the penal colony in a state of conflict, but also of self-knowledge.

The reader participates in this experience of self-knowledge. A considerable part of the story's achievement is to make us entertain the fantasy ourselves and acknowledge to some degree the response it stirs in us. The news it brings us about ourselves is not good.

It does not seem accurate to make of the creator of so cruelly powerful a work a "medieval minnesinger," a saint, an abominator of violence. Kafka may have abominated violence in his own life (and even this is not so clear: he was eager to be called up in 1915); in his work he shows that at some level he was excited by it, half in love with it. As we all are. If we were not, human history would be very different. As for his "saintliness": to make someone a saint is to put him beyond the reach of understanding and analysis. Saints are to be admired and venerated, not to be understood. This may be the easiest way to conceal from ourselves the disturbing quality of Kafka's work and our own fascination with it. But it would be better, if we can, to confront and understand it. Not "so well that his appeal is destroyed," according to Günther Anders's severe prescription—but well enough to understand the dubious sources of that appeal, not only in Kafka but in ourselves.

Barbara Probst Solomon

**MARGUERITE DURAS:
THE POLITICS OF PASSION**

This past year, while I was reading both *The War: A Memoir* and *The Lover*, the themes in those books reminded me of my meeting with Marguerite Duras in New York in, I think, 1964. Despite her success with *Hiroshima*, perhaps because it was during the height of the anti-Americanism of French intellectuals, not much fuss seemed to be made about her visit here. One of her American editors, I believe at Grove Press, had sent out an S.O.S. to find an American writer who spoke French, drove a car, and had some free time to take her around the city and to Coney Island. I had just published my first novel, and I was still so bewildered that it had actually been put in print, and that I was expected to do another one, that I spent most of my time lazily doing nothing. In brief, I was unemployed. So when I was recruited for the job, I was delighted. Ed Lyons, the husband of my friend, Augusta Lyons, drove us out to Coney Island in his battered old station wagon.

My relation to Duras that day wasn't of one writer to another, but more like that of a professor on an outing with a promising graduate student. She showed up at my apartment on Central Park West wearing a brown suede jacket, low walking shoes, and one of those well-cut wool sweaters atop an equally well-cut French skirt, of the sort French Left Bank women wore then that made them look intellectual yet stylish. Duras was definite about what she wanted. A walk along the boardwalk, the seals, and she had been informed that the hot dogs of Nathan's were not to be missed. Ed and I walked on either side of her. Much later I realized that all of what we did, saw, and talked about, that day, was stage-managed by Duras. She was the most extraordinarily visual person I had ever met. We had driven through Carnarsie, along the Bay, to get to Coney Island. Marguerite Duras refused to believe that those commodious white

Editor's Note: This essay was first presented as a talk given at the 1986 spring colloquium on Marguerite Duras held by the New York University Department of French in conjunction with the French Government and the Alliance Française. Copyright © 1986 Barbara Probst Solomon.

houses facing the sea weren't inhabited by the rich. I said, no, Carnarsie wasn't at all fashionable. And Duras, who was reasoning with her eyes, argued back: I had to be wrong, the sea was beautiful, the white houses were beautiful, Carnarsie was near Manhattan—why didn't the rich live there? It was as if she had been injected with megadoses of LSD behind her eyes, her sense of vision was so overpowering. She guided us over to the aquarium: there, meditating on the baby seals and dolphins at play, she remarked she didn't like Beauvoir's assumption that childbirth was a masochistic act for women. After deftly checking to make sure I wasn't a Beauvoir aficionado, Duras grumbled that the author of *The Second Sex* lacked a sense of humor and was too much of a schoolmarm: "She knows nothing about women's real need to have children." And we talked about my two little girls and her son. (Duras didn't seem very aware of the presence of my friend, Ed.) We went inside a souvenir shop. She was delighted to find a dusty button that read "Royal Family Go Home." She bought it, pinned it on her lapel, and from that Coney Island seaside junk memento politically reasoned: "So—America is antiroyalist?" "Lady," the shopkeeper drawled, "that button is left over from the 1930s when King George came to New York. It's dusty—it doesn't mean anything."

But to Duras, everything—Carnarsie, the sea, the dusty button, all meant something; they resembled other objects that already were a permanent part of her memory. She and I agreed, at the end of the afternoon, that the next day we would visit art galleries. Again, she was very purposeful in what she chose to see. She wanted to see the work of the sculptor, Marisol, which was at the Stable Gallery in the East 60s. The gallery was small space for the bizarre-bizarre repetitive quality of Marisol's narcissistic celebration of a cloning of icons all having to do with herself—her body, her odd hair ribbons, shoes and handbags. Marguerite Duras's attention to the exhibit was so devouringly fierce, so unrelenting, that between the schizophrenic multiple heads of Marisol, and Duras's visual concentration on them, I got a sudden attack of claustrophobia. Marguerite Duras wanted to know what I thought of Marisol's work, and I mumbled that I was an asthmatic and couldn't stay a minute more, it was all making me dizzy; and I went outside and waited in the fresh air.

Interestingly, in view of the attention she pays to these things in *The Lover*, she spent a great deal of time discussing clothes and fancy

cars. After the Marisol exhibit she abruptly asked me what I would do if someone offered me something as bourgeois as a mink coat. As this was during the radical sixties, when black turtleneck sweaters and belted frayed raincoats were in style, and fancy bourgeois stuff out, I assumed that her stance was merely puritanical “gauchiste,” typical of that time, and because it amused me to *épater* the left a little bit, I said, “Wear it,” and that startled her. I still remember her puzzled intent stare, as she sat in my living room, quizzing me on my position on luxury cars. I kept insisting that I loved the idea of luxury cars and luxury everything. But Duras took her questions and my replies seriously. And I now realize that the luxury car she must have been thinking about—which in my mind I saw as a small fire-red convertible—in her mind already may have been the long black limousine of her Chinese lover in *The Lover*. By then, that book must already have been partially formed in her mind.

In our tour through New York I was puzzled how someone as visually eclectic as Duras could be so dumb about politics. She insisted that blacks took drugs in Harlem and that whites were drunks in the Bowery. Though Ed had driven us right through the Bowery on the same day we had gone to Coney Island, I couldn’t get Marguerite Duras to understand that, though it was true that Harlem was black, this didn’t mean that the Bowery was exclusively white. In her mind’s eye there was an invisible geographical boundary that separated even a derelict black man from a white derelict one. I tried to get her to see things in New York that weren’t part of her own predetermined view of New York; but such things typical of Manhattan—old people on the Upper West Side, a particular kind of American big-city alienation and loneliness—didn’t interest her; none of it was part of her universe. Then last summer, after I read *The Lover*, I understood that the reason Marguerite Duras didn’t comprehend my view of New York during her visit in the 1960s was that she had superimposed on Manhattan the real boundary lines that had existed in her French colonial childhood in Indochina. Thus, in *The Lover*, when her lover’s father smokes opium, it always is done in a place far removed from the dwellings of the bourgeois whites. For the young Duras the boundaries of *place* must have seemed so real, so immutable, and just as significant to her as the sea which separated her and her family from their home in the Loire region in the heart of France.

Duras juggles political symbols, displaced passion and guilt in

Hiroshima mon amour, *The Lover* and *The War: A Memoir*, in her own way. Possibly, the true lover of *The Lover* might not be the Chinese man, but the beloved younger brother (in many interviews Duras has insisted that her novel is her true autobiography), and *The Lover* really may be a tale of incest disguised to shock as miscegenation. At the time I first thought of that, I hadn't yet seen her movie, *Agatha*; but had I, it would have reaffirmed my hunch. Not only is the movie about brother/sister incest, the key love scene seems a replica of a similar scene in *The Lover*.

I also was struck by the similarity of a crucial Oedipal scene in *Hiroshima* to a similar scene in *The Lover*. In *Hiroshima*, the girl is locked in a room, her hair cropped; she is savagely punished for loving the German collaborator. In *The Lover*, there is also a scene about shame and purification in which the mother suspects that her daughter is having an affair with the Chinese man. She locks the daughter in her room. The mother "comes to me and smells my body, my underwear, says she can smell the Chinese's scent . . . and shouts for the whole town to hear, that her daughter is a prostitute." In *Hiroshima*, the townspeople of Nevers consider the narrator to be a prostitute because she has had an affair with a German soldier.

In *The Lover*, the narrator's hair is also cropped, but this time the punishment is self-inflicted by the girl who is overcome with shame. The mother has separated her from her beloved brother, and she departs for Paris. In both stories the heroine has to cross a boundary, the Mekong river in *The Lover*, the Loire in *Hiroshima*, in order to keep her lovers' trysts. And in both instances, Duras interrupts the story of the shameful passion for an inappropriate outsider (whom I believe is the brother) in order to interject a piece of political symbolism. In *Hiroshima*, at the points when the adolescent love affair is sweetest, most lyrical, Duras displaces her story of occupied France onto images of atomic destruction in Japan. Now, Duras is so gifted, and that imagery is so powerful, and about such a cataclysmical event, the audience is engulfed and perhaps left unaware that their attention is being deflected, and the true meaning of the lover's story is being hidden by photos of Hiroshima victims. Indeed, the scenes about Japan, because they are so jarring, by contrast, act to heighten and make purer the early love affair. But what is more puzzling is the abrupt way in which Duras interjects, almost from left field, political symbols in the narrative of *The Lover*. After she writes a particularly lyrical and poignant description of the adolescent younger brother and sister playing alone together in a

sweet period while the hated older brother is away in France, Duras abruptly switches to an odd political defense of the French fascists, Robert Brasillach and Drieu la Rochelle, who worked with the German Gestapo. (The French executed Brasillach after the liberation of France, and Drieu killed himself before the French found him.) Then, directly after that amazing political digression, she resumes her story of the young narrator's love affair, but now, with a deft sleight of hand, the brother is replaced by her wealthy Chinese lover, who drives his black limousine through Saigon. What I am suggesting is that the key scene, which was probably the seduction *by the sister* of the brother, Duras never finishes but displaces, frequently by a political subplot.

If my theory is correct, it may have been that this time sequence is literally what happened to Duras. If one reads the Duras novel as autobiography, from her written sequence of events one could make the following supposition: directly after her troubled adolescence in Indochina, in her next phase in Paris, she may have tried to bury her early shameful incestuous seduction of her weak, pliable brother by attaching herself to an equally powerful but very different type of magnet—political men and political concerns, that is, the Communist Party. Her shameful incestuous affair with her brother then gets hidden and becomes obsessively and repetitively displaced by political images throughout her work, not as a device—but because it actually happened in that sequence. It is only recently that Duras has made explicit statements about the role of incest in her work.

When I reread *The Lover* a second time, substituting the brother for the Chinese man, the love affair and passions made more sense. In *The New Republic* I pointed out that “. . . the sexual exotic, really is the French girl, not the man. In the important first seduction scene she is in control. The fifteen year-old narrator commands the horrified man to seduce her: ‘Treat me like you treat the other woman.’ But would a Chinese millionaire's son, who had lived in Paris and known many French women, be weeping and what I call mewling like a stuck pig at the thought of making love to a sexy French girl he had picked up?” And why would an adolescent affair with an adoring Chinese man who promises to—and apparently does—love the girl forever permanently ravage and ruin the young girl's face? *What* is the tragedy?

If read as incest, many passages in the novel suddenly become more understandable; it begins to make emotional sense: "She says, I'd rather you didn't love me. But if you do, I'd like you to do as you usually do with women. He looks at her in horror, asks, is that what you want? She says it is. He's started to suffer here in this room, for the first time, he's no longer lying about it. . . . He says he's lonely, horribly lonely because of this love he feels for her. She says she's lonely too." (Then it is the girl who undresses the man, who is portrayed as vacillating, weak, afraid and resistant to what is going to take place.) "He moans, he weeps, in dreadful love. . . . The sea, formless, in advance." (There is an almost identical love-making scene near the sea in her film about incest, *Agatha*.) Then the narrator switches to their mother: "The image of the woman in darned stockings has crossed the room, and at last she emerges as a child. The sons knew it already. But not the daughter yet. They'd never talk about their mother among themselves, about the knowledge of her which they both shared and which separated them from her: the final, decisive knowledge that their mother was a child. Their mother never knew pleasure. . . ." (Then after several more pages we get to the final line.) "Do it to me, and he did, did it in the unctuousness of blood. And it really was unto death. It has been unto death."

If the sister seduces the brother, and this leaves them both traumatized, it then makes sense that after the girl leaves Indochina for Paris, she receives only one short letter in ten years from her adored brother: an oblique message that he is "all right." And also why, in the family scenes in Indochina, when the Chinese takes the girl and her brothers out dancing, he seems to her suddenly so powerless and nonexistent. During the Japanese occupation of Indochina, in 1942, the brother dies of pneumonia. Though there is much talk of loss through death, it is the brother, not the lover, who actually does die.

I have pointed out that ". . . at the end of the book Duras describes the Chinese man—or whomever he might symbolize—visiting the narrator many years later in Paris. But it is a common wish, that one's first love will return, pledging undying *amour*. More subliminally perhaps, Duras may be mixing a passionate private fantasy with a public political fantasy. The return of the lover to Duras may stand for France's dream that its lost Indochina will be restored, and will eschew its marriage to "the other Chinese woman":

It must have been a long time before [the Chinese man] was able . . . to give [his Chinese wife] the heir to their fortunes. The memory of the little white girl must have been there. . . . For a long time she must have remained the queen of his desire, his personal link with . . . the immensity of tenderness. . . .

Here, with skillful incantation, Duras magnificently fuses the Chinese man, her son (the child is born shortly before the novel ends), her adored dead brother, France, and its lost colonial empire:

And with the trembling, suddenly, she heard again the voice of China. He knew she'd begun writing books, he'd heard about it through her mother whom he'd met again in Saigon. And about her younger brother, and he'd been grieved for her. Then he didn't know what to say. And then he told her. Told her that it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death.

Because Marguerite Duras uses her political interpolations to heighten or displace her narrations of incest and miscegenation, and injects them into her work, they need to be looked at in their own terms, and because they are political and have to do with real history, they have to be taken at face value. In sharp contrast to the lyrical poetics of her narration, her political asides frequently are blunt and explicit. Thus, in *The War: A Memoir* her description of the Spanish resistance during the liberation of Paris (the FAI, etc.) is the specific point of view of an experienced Communist pro. Her apologies for French fascists like Brasillach no doubt reflect her fury at having been expelled from the French Communist Party in the late 1940s—thus, fascists suddenly seem to her no worse than members of the resistance who had been Communists. The destruction in *Hiroshima* is highly effective and anti-American propaganda (she equates our efforts to liberate France with our atomic destruction of Japan), and her descriptions of life in Saigon are filled with standard French colonial racist prejudices. Duras has got into the habit of using her political asides almost like a blank pause meant to obscure her real passion—her tragic tale of incest—and she has also managed to get her readers and movie audiences to collude with her in treating these political *adagios* as though not there. No, not even a symbolic meaning. The politics are treated as a mere dust jacket

covering the real stuff. But Duras, now, is an important writer. She writes in many different voices and modes, and I take all of them seriously, including the political, which I believe ill thought-out, and at times appalling. It is precisely because I accept her urgency, and her literary skill, that I feel it is so important also to say, look here, at times, this or that is wrong, immoral or utter nonsense.

Coming in

Partisan Review

- An Interview with William Phillips
- Poetry by Joseph Brodsky
- An Interview with Zbigniew Herbert
- Pearl K. Bell on Kate Chopin and Sarah Orne Jewett
- Raymond Aron: *A Memoir*
- An Interview with Stephen Spender
- Nathan Glazer on Life in the Bronx
- Eugene Goodheart on Desire and Its Discontents
- Fiction by José Donoso
- Steven Marcus on Ernest Hemingway

POEMS

Richard Eberhart

STONE FENCE

They are sitting on a stone fence by a mall.
They have the youth and good looks of the mid-twenties.
Beside them rises a new building of brick and steel.
The jack hammers have just ceased making a big noise.

They seem innocent, adequate, and are certainly childless.
They do not look at each other with fervor or supplication.
They look as if they took life for granted, were sure
Of the langorous hills surrounding the old town.

A zealot who is totally alive to reality,
Aware of an election coming up almost at once,
Seeing these extravagantly detached lollers,
Asks them why they do not go next door and vote.

A citizen should vote for one side or another,
Take sides, be active, know what the world is doing.
They looked blissful sitting on a stone fence,
These young people went on munching candy bars.

These two were as it were out of history,
They did not seem to take part in the system,
You knew they would get up and drive or walk home
Without the slightest knowledge of the fall of Rome.

David Lehman

GALLERY NOTES

The title doesn't have to have
anything to do with what
Is depicted: "Dance You Monster

To My Soft Song,”
“The King and Queen Surrounded By
Swift Nudes.”
We see what we want to see when
we aren’t looking.
Elegant angels in dinner jackets dance
with nudes wearing
Red slippers, and clouds sail in
through open windows.
Process is everything—the process
of assimilation
(A freshly-made bed with giant-sized
toiletries on it),
The process of elimination (the bather
emerges on the shore,
His forehead a blank). These are
the instructions and these
The warnings you will hear: eliminate
the model and she
Will have her revenge; eliminate the sky
but save the stars;
Enlarge the rose to fill the canvas;
eliminate yellow.
Then put it all back in and see what
happens. Eliminate the model:
Look at her look at herself in the mirror
before it cracks
Into a cobwebbed windshield, and the car
radio’s still playing
As the children walk away from the wreck.
Suddenly the viewer
Is going to die, and knows it. The thought
occurs to him at least
Once a day. Then come the boyhood flashes
and the fear of having left
Something undone, but never knowing what.
“This is the world I want
To live in: a place where the man who thinks
he has no illusions has

At least that one; where his speechless son
can fill his mouth
With pebbles, and learn to outshout the sea.”

Ingeborg Bachmann

A TYPE OF LOSS

Commonly used: seasons, books and music.
The keys, the tea cups, the breadbasket, sheets
and a bed.
A dowry of words, of gestures, brought along,
used, spent.
Manners observed. Said. Done. And always
the hand extended.

With winter, a Vienna septet and with summer I've
been in love.
With maps, a mountain hut, with a beach and
a bed.
A cult filled with dates, promises
impossibly given,
enthused about Something and pious before Nothing,

(—the folded newspapers, cold ashes, the slip
with a jotted note)
fearless in religion, because the church was this bed.

From the seascape came my inexhaustible painting.
From the balcony, the people below, my neighbors,
were there to greet.
By the fire, in safety, my hair had its most exceptional
color.
The doorbell ringing was the alarm for my joy.

It was not you I lost,
but rather the world.

Translated from the German by Peter Filkins

Philip Appleman

GERTRUDE C. APPLEMAN (1901–1976)

*God is omniscient, omnipotent,
and omnipresent.*

I wish that all those people
who worship God
could watch my mother die:
could see the skin and
gristle weighing in
at seventy-seven, every melting
pound of flesh a small
death.

I wish that all the people who
worship God could see her young,
lovely in aprons and
beautiful in kitchens, and could watch
an omnipotent God slowly
twisting her knees and fingers
till they gnarled and knotted, settling in
for thirty years of pain.

I wish that all those people
who worship God
could see the lightning
of His omnipotent cancer stabbing
my mother's belly, her tiny
body tensing at every shock, her sweet

contralto scratchy with
the Lord's diseases: *Philip*,
I want to die.

I wish I had them all
gathered round, those ministers, bishops,
rabbis, popes, TV
evangelists, faith healers,
gurus, ayatollahs,
every freak and fraud
on God's payroll, and I
would pull the sheets
from my mother's brittle body
and every holy shill
in that room would be
struck blind, and they
would fall on their knees at that bedside
to be forgiven all their faith.

Mario Luzi

AND THE WOLF

When the ice creaks and animals in fear
on the banks look at the tumbling seas
and drifting icebergs

and harpooned sharks quiver and die
and eager to give life the wasting salmon
buck the torrential flow

and the wolf
with an anguish that's his
his ancestors' his cubs'
thus torn at heart

heads for the mountains and discovers
he's quick on his old legs,
ears cocked for the call of native winds
trumpeting love, the stalking and the kill

o life not mine,
pain I carry into the night from chaos,
suddenly you are yourself again
twisting in your chains under the load

To live alive like one who—no choice given—
faithfully serves: all, even the dark
immemorial beasts howling in us,
can be redeemed. It takes little—that little
cuts like a sword.

Translated from the Italian by Ned Condini

Mark Rudman

EVENTUAL CLAIMS

This light, I was thinking, is not natural.
And it had nothing to do with the pinks and grays
of the factories
flowing into the Hudson.

The truth under the froth of evening, under the night sky
which lowering we cannot see, under
the eventual claims of night,
under the sun's rim,

under the yellow letters on the red brick wall:
“Durable./Scrubbable./Resistant.”—
I should have thought
they would have added “Eternal.” . . .

The only ritual a ritual of light over a gravesite.
Cypresses, old churches at the edge of things.

Marble I can feel.
Granite tombs among the hedges.

A certain state of mind that magnifies the passing of time.
A certain grace she inhabits, a state that cannot
be approached,
only encountered, borne.

The truth, on a Saturday afternoon
in late winter is not to be encountered.

The mind, ragged, is not
ready for the fact.

The encounter with the other dissolves in her hair.
Gone among the sunken factories.

The truth, from the point of view
of an avenue, a forest path, a tree frog.

The truth, said Schopenhauer somewhere,
should not be mistaken
for a willed honesty.

João Cabral de Melo Neto

ENCOUNTER WITH A POET

In a certain place in La Mancha
where the Castilian plain is hardest,
in the midst of a stiff blowing
wind armed with sand,
I was surprised by the presence,

Editor's Note: Miguel Hernández (b.1910) was captured by Franco's forces in the Spanish Civil War. He wrote much of his poetry in prison, where he remained until his death in 1942.

severer than I had imagined,
of one Miguel Hernández,
a farmer of Orihuela.
The voice of this Miguel,
hanging between word and earth,
the same uncertain earth
houses in Fraga are made of,
was once an architecture,
a metric voice of stone,
crystallized the way
Madrid is to newcomers.
But the voice I discerned
in the highland wind
was of tortured, beaten earth,
the earth of a threshing floor—
not the expurgated voice
of the poet's selected works
but an edition of the wind,
not found in libraries.
It was a disturbing edition,
to which many shut the window
(disturbing because the wind
frees instead of censoring).
The voice which I heard
in the wind of the highland
was Miguel's final voice
gone hoarse from war
(perhaps even harsher
in the dialect of dust;
perhaps more mutilated
in the wind's interpretation).
I saw that the beaten land
of the end of the poet's life,
land turned to stone
from so much suffering,
had multiplied itself
in those knives of sand
and had, in the process,
multiplied its edges.

In that edition of the wind
the voice directly touched me—
it had gained blades of stone,
like an amputated tree.

Translated from the Spanish by Richard Zenith

Linda Gregg

SURROUNDED BY SHEEP AND LOW LAND

When Death comes, we take off our clothes
and gather everything we left behind:
what is dark, broken, touched with shame.
When Death demands we give an accounting,
naked we present our lives in bundles.
See how much these weigh, we tell him,
refusing to deny what we have lived.
Everything that is touched by light
loves the light. We the stubborn as grass,
we who reel at the taste of sap
want our spirits cleansed; but will not
betray the weeds, snake, or crippled mare. .
Never leave behind what the light shone on.

Jay Parini

GRANDMOTHER IN HEAVEN

In a plume-field, white above the blue,
she's pulling up a hoard of rootcrops
planted in a former life and left to ripen:
soft gold carrots, beets, bright gourds.

There's coffee in the wind, tobacco smoke
and garlic, olive oil and lemon.
Fires burn coolly through the day,
the water boils at zero heat.
It's always almost time for Sunday dinner,
with the boys all home: dark Nello,
who became his cancer and refused to breathe;
her little Gino, who went down the mines
and whom they had to dig all week to find;
that willow, Tony, who became so thin
he blew away; then Julius and Leo,
who survived the others by their wits alone
but found no reason, after all was said,
for hanging on. They'll take their places
in the sun today at her high table,
as the antique beams light up the plates,
the faces that have lately come to shine.

George Ellenbogen

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

We arrange the Meissen between us
(tundish for you, tureen pushed to my side),
dividing the final rags of a marriage
from an affair several years dead.

Our hands shepherd transparencies
one by one by light to view
until birthdays and vacations fall
like sheared fleece upon the hardwood floor.

The books fall more readily
into rank, soldiering stiffly
for what we used at night
to keep from one another's sight.

And records—call them music
if you will—we add contempt
to each release. A hurried trade
speeds some last knick-knacks on their way.

And two more, aged twelve and eight,
we consign to weekends, holidays;
ourselves to minutes parked in driveways
watching parentage slip away.

The bed, old scarred four-poster,
hides like an embarrassment upstairs
because after many turns and twistings
it will not squeeze through the bedroom door.

Dorin Tudoran

A CROSS

Bringer of our death
you've taught me of late
to behold this Milky Way of lies
ending in two blue gates

both deep as the infinite
and just as spacious
looming before us like icons
each bubbling with countless nations

Rise again, you staunch bringer
of earthquakes and ruin!
I want to call you one last time
and carve for you a cross of rain.

THE MASTER TO HIS APPRENTICE

Paint the lunatic's shoulder
thence let the true chiaroscuro
spring forth; the clavicle
like a bridge rising
to meet his twisted face.
Frozen
on his lips the primal flavor
of the word
that could not rise a few inches above
the lips without being jeered at.

A BURNING

for Ion Caraion

Oh, God
how we are scattered
like pepper berries
rolling from
a broken bag—
black irises
ejected from the white
of the eye
no longer able to bear
the burning tear
or the scorching light
no longer making allowances
no longer! —

Translated from the Romanian by Marcel Cornis-Pop

Harvey Shapiro

COMMENT

Stepin Fetchit—this is from
his obituary in The Times—justifying
his life, the eyeball rolling
he had done for his movie pay,
spoke of Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier:
“I set up thrones for them to come
and sit on.” A noble quote, like,
“We are, in midmost ground, our own dead kings.”
Blackmur’s iambic roll to it.
That he, down the long avenue, could
find himself, in purple stuff, leading the way.

Harriet Levin

The Christmas Show

While my youngest sister lies
on a cold cellar floor
in a house whose broken windows hold back nothing
and three boys pin down her shoulders
and force their way past her belt buckle, I am watching
The Christmas Show at Radio City Music Hall, seeing
a full moon accentuate the otherworldliness
of children dressed as elves, skating snowmen
and cardboard reindeer.

While my youngest sister lies on her back, stripped naked,
and three boys, one at a time, move over her, I am applauding
when an entire row of girls
wearing bright red bathing suits
fleece with white fur
kick open their legs, the whole house applauds
at that moment. While my youngest sister looks into the dark
wide pupils she will look into
for the rest of her life, the boys
who prick her throat with a knife
feel only a momentary pleasure.
And just when I think The Christmas Show is over,
the curtain opens once more
with sheep, straw and stars
and the story of the nativity begins,
of a birth with no sex in it.
A real live camel is led across the stage
in a caravan with sheiks, children and beggars
waiting to be touched and saved,
but at that moment
my mother is rushing to open the front door
my sister pounds
and pounds on, blood on her face, her lips
swollen, her cheek swollen, her
eyes swollen, having seen enough.

Arthur A. Cohen

ON JUDAISM AND MODERNISM

Let us agree upon working definitions of both Judaism and modernism. Without them—even if they are definitions laid down by stricture (since you are not in a position to instantly reply and set me straight)—no progress can be made in describing their interaction and conflict.

Judaism is a religion founded upon a covenant made by God with the Jewish People through the instrumentality of Moses. It is a religion grounded in a fundamental myth (that God in fact spoke and transmitted his will through his servant Moses to a recalcitrant people) combined with an innovative sense of history (that eternal persons become concrete in time, express their wills in language and through the workings of words, actions, and interpretation are conserved and transmitted to future generations of believers).

Modernism claims no such revelation, but it is grounded no less than Judaism upon both myth and history. Its definition is that the meaning and sensibility of contemporary culture is not to be found in the unfolding of historic events and encounters but in the inner workings of the psyche and the self. Its corollaries are that nothing is literally true; everything must be interpreted according to rules and principles defined by the aesthetics, language, ethos of the artist-maker. There may be an objective historical correlative, but it is less significant to the modernist impulse than the authenticity of the self that authorizes and makes the work. The myth of modernism lies in the nature of the critique that it delivers to rationalism, to romanticism, and to historicism, claiming that all three reflect the smug and self-assured doctrines that made of the nineteenth century the pesthole and breeding swamp of contemporary disasters.

Modernism raised questions not merely about the relation of art to eternal truths—that issue had already been settled by the disengagement of the arts from the service of the sacred—but more to the point, about the purpose of art on any terms. Why art at all, other than to satisfy the requirements of a prosperous bourgeoisie

Editor's Note: This essay was presented as a talk given at the National Jewish Book Awards, May 17, 1984, at the New York Public Library.

that required art as a further ornament and decoration to a life already golden and gilded? The connection between art and meaning, the making of art and the authentication of civilization was already in question before the First World War. In its aftermath, the Dadaists would insist that art was only an artifact of power and should be caustically nullified, while the post-revolutionary Soviet artists would deny value to the art object in its entirety and claim that art had value only if it led to the production of useful works that would enhance the life of the proletariat. West and East, art was to be obliterated or else, where pursued, was to be conducted in a spirit of such radical reconception of the world as to leave all but a handful of early enthusiasts of Cubism baffled and tormented by the Cubist refusal of a traditional rendering of the object world. The modernist critique of literary expressionism was no less devastating: Kafka's *oeuvre*, made up of unfinished stories, each fabulated as a new myth of the hopeless entrapment, guilt, and confusion of one person, Franz Kafka, secured a reading of the twentieth-century psyche as jarring and dislocated in language as was the achievement of Alban Berg, Anton Webern, and Arnold Schonberg in music, devising as they did a system of serial expression in which all the permutations of the twelve tones yield a new music that annihilates and transcends the formal structure of classicism, in the direction of a previously unexamined musical language.

The modernist response was not, as it has now become, a given of the century, taken for granted, grist for the academician, but in those early days the most painful and brutal of personal decisions. The artist no longer believed in the possibility of new creation or for that matter in its efficacy but nonetheless, desperately, persistently, continued to create. The issue for Kafka, for Schonberg, for Igor Stravinsky, to mention another, was henceforth how to remove the work of creation from the welter of subjectivity in which it had been mired by the ego-asserting confidence of the previous century. Subjectivity had gone far enough in the plastic arts, in music, in literature and poetry. It was necessary to restore man to his precarious estate, to affirm his contingency, and to separate the work of art from any self-deluding ratification of the human being as the sufficient measure of genius and worth. Already with millions dead in the Great War, the suspicion of the prewar generation—Rilke over Stefan George, Rodin over Daumier, Picasso over Delacroix, Thomas Mann over Flaubert, Schonberg and Stravinsky over Mahler and Berlioz—authenticates a direction in which the auton-

omous self is no longer secure but battered, the old forms insufficient, and the reaching for formal structure more deeply buried in the consciousness of the race of mankind can be brought forth. Schonberg and Stravinsky both strive for the integration of music and the voice; Kafka affirms an ambiguous reading of the traditional assumptions and Western culture mythology that requires that each of the deep myths of the race—the expulsion from Paradise, the tower of Babel, the binding of Prometheus—be rescruinized and reinterpreted. The challenge to the modernist revolution is pressed by the late generation of the twentieth century as both a critique of the modernist enthronement of the autonomous ego (and in this Sigmund Freud joins with Kafka in an unsettling entente) as well as an assertion that something has been lost, that values have been elided, that vital connections of human creativity to the eternal orders of the universe—if there are such anyway—have been pushed aside. The critique could be pressed by the postwar European generation because if modernism entailed the kind of human desolation and destruction wrought by four years of war and devastation, then of what use is free and untrammelled creation?

This is the basic situation. Judaism has both much and little to say about this predicament. As doctrine, Judaism can be used—we now understand—to criticize any position one finds objectionable. There is a rich enough literature of interpretation in Judaism to both validate and obliterate individual creativity and artistic expression, to subdue the ego to the task of study, to make holiness a sufficient model of human excellence and perfection as to render the individualistic achievement of the nineteenth century both irrelevant at the least or idolatrous in its extremity. But such a critique by exclusion is a dangerous procedure. We cannot rid the world of the ideologically disagreeable by arbitrary fiat. Literature and the arts will not go away or, more to the point, Jews who make literature and art will not stop doing so simply because canonic Judaism has not devised a theological language for authenticating their enterprise. At the very least, even if beauty is a minor priority of the Jewish spirit, well behind righteousness, mercy, and truth, those Jews who cannot rise from the aesthetic to the religious (as Kierkegaard and later Franz Rosenzweig recommended) will continue to be obsessed with making the beautiful as a pale image of the truth. The Jewish task in making art is, however, much more subtle and complex than being satisfied with beauty, when it is truth that is commanded. Giving prizes to Jews for doing good work is part and parcel of precisely the

individualist mystique that upon scrutiny we would reject. Jews are not to be given special praise for doing what they should anyhow undertake to do always, that is, to do excellent work. The stamp of the ego is not on the truth, but rather the image of God which is of an altogether different order of individuality and expression.

Leave this be. Let us close with a single example of the direction that a Jewish creative genius, a consummate critic of his own romanticism and an authentic voice of both modernist triumphalism and modernist humility, has taken. I speak not of a literary man, but of the composer, Arnold Schonberg, whose critique of modernism moved him from a maker of music to a maker of music with language, that is profoundly instructive (I should add that the no less complex Jewish novelist, Hermann Broch, undertook much the same kind of experiment in his novels *The Sleepwalkers* and *The Death of Virgil*, where, if you will, the silence amidst his words approaches to modern music).

Schonberg was born in Vienna in 1874, the first child of a poor shopkeeper's family, his mother observant and conservative, his father a free-thinking anarchist. Schonberg studied violin, but there was no piano in his home. He began to compose at the age of eleven, an undoubted genius, but without formal training; he was apprenticed to a bank from which he departed to take up his precarious vocation as musician and composer in 1895. Born into a Jewish household where matters of faith were strenuously argued by his believing mother and skeptical father, Schonberg early declared himself a nonbeliever, although he maintained a fierce affection for the Bible. Unexplained, but seriously undertaken, Schonberg was baptized into the Reformed Church as Protestant in 1898, like his friend Gustav Mahler, who had become a Catholic the year before, and yet, it is clear, Schonberg could affirm no differently than Mahler, who had described himself "as a Bohemian among Austrians, an Austrian among Germans, and a Jew among all the nations of the world." The last cluster of biographical facts are these: in 1923, in response to a scandalous rumor (promoted it appears by Alma Mahler, then the wife of Walter Gropius, architect and director of the Bauhaus) that Vassily Kandinsky, the founder of the Blue Four and an early champion of Schonberg's work as painter and composer, was an anti-Semite, Schonberg wrote Kandinsky on May 4, ". . . when I walk along the street and each person looks at me to see whether I'm a Jew or a Christian, I can't very well tell each of them I'm the one that Kandinsky and some others make an excep-

tion of, although of course that man Hitler is not of their opinion.” And later in the same letter: “How can a Kandinsky approve of my being insulted . . . how can he refrain from combating a view of the world whose aim is St. Bartholomew’s nights in the darkness, of which no one will be able to read the little placard saying that I’m exempt.” Ten years later, on July 30, 1933, having been dismissed from his post in Berlin and excluded from the musical world that he had revolutionized, in a private ceremony at the synagogue on the Rue de la Victoire in Paris, Arnold Schonberg was again received into the Jewish religion. From that moment until his death in 1951, Schonberg never departed his people again. It may be contended that his conversion to Judaism was an act of solidarity with his beleaguered folk, but that would be to oversimplify a gesture which, at its most profound, had been prepared long before the event and remained in the deepest sense a religious act. In 1922, writing to Kandinsky, he had described his oratorio, *Jacob’s Ladder*, as an affirmation of religion; indeed, as he continued, “This (religion) had been my one and only support all these years—let this be said here for the first time.”

No less was the case with his complex interpretation of the Messianic obligation of the Chosen People set forth in his opera of 1926, *The Biblical Way* (*Der biblische Weg*), where the sacrificial death of his hero, Max Aruns, symbolizes the impossible unity of spirit and word, impossible precisely because the modern world cannot bear that the man of spirit should also be the one who can interpret and communicate himself. This contention about the precarious estate of prophecy becomes all the clearer in Schonberg’s masterpiece, the opera *Moses and Aaron*, the most complex and demanding work of the modern operatic *oeuvre*. Building freely upon Biblical texts, Schonberg creates a dichotomy and antagonism between Moses, the lover of God and the bearer of his message who lacks the power of eloquent speech, and Aaron, lover of Moses and the People, who cannot see God other than through the spirit of Moses, and is fated therefore to misunderstand God’s requirements, while nonetheless being able to interpret eloquently Moses’s rendition of the divine Word. The opera is constructed in such a way that Moses never sings melodically, but follows the pattern of *Sprechgesang*, that is the half-sung, almost monotonous speech of one who has visions but does not command language, and the melodic, enriched voice of Aaron who has no vision but possesses the power of speech.

The singular aspect of this consummate work is that the pro-

fundity of its musicality is as much present in its poignant and dramatic use of silence, of the interval, of the separation of the spoken word and the sung word, as in its dissonant instrumentation, so jarring to the familiar harmonics of Wagnerian opera or the operas of Richard Strauss on which Schonberg had been raised. Schonberg creates a music and a libretto to seize the inexpressible, to translate beauty beyond itself into the sublime, to make an opera where the single central presence is the unseen, unspeaking, unheard God. It is little wonder that after the making of this opera, begun in 1928 and uncompleted at his death (although he worked on it fitfully throughout the 1940s, while composing his memorial *A Survivor from Warsaw* in 1948 and his *De Profundis* set to the Hebrew text of Psalm 130), *Moses and Aaron* remains one of the triumphant examples of a Jewish reading of the crisis of modernism. At the conclusion of Act Two, having destroyed the Golden Calf and shattered the Tablets, Moses is left alone after the People have disappeared and Aaron has followed them into the darkness: Moses in Schonberg's libretto sing-talks an astonishing cry of despair:

Inconceivable God
 Inexpressible, many-sided idea,
 will you let it be so explained?
 Shall Aaron, my mouth, fashion this image?
 Then I have fashioned an image too, false,
 as an image must be.
 Thus am I defeated!
 Thus, all was madness that/ I believed before,
 and can and must not be given voice.
 O Word, thou word, that I lack!

Moses has recognized that it is not merely the Golden Calf that is false, but words themselves. Nothing can communicate adequately what is beyond speech. There is no way that he can bring down the Word and speak it to the People. It is not merely that he stutters while Aaron speaks like a charmed flute—all words are false, all language deceives, no truth can make over a rotted mankind. And in this, Schonberg gives to Moses in his final assertion: "O Word, thou Word, that I lack" an affirmation that every artist of this century who has been wedded to the truth can share: no work of art is equal to its intention, and everything, even the work that appears to be complete, is fated to incompleteness and failure.

So much for the battered God of the Jews, so much for triumphant modernism. In the one, I find hope; in the other, as an artist I share despair.

Sara Frankel

AN INTERVIEW WITH MURIEL SPARK

SF: Do you find it odd that you've come to be known primarily as a novelist, after having begun your career as a poet and a critic?

MS: No, I always meant to be a writer. Becoming a novelist was quite haphazard, because the publisher asked me to write a novel. It was a man called Alan McLean, at Macmillan, and I told him I didn't think I would write a novel, I would give him some short stories. He asked me to write this novel to help him keep his job, which was to find young writers. I said okay, I'd try, and we were both very amazed when it was successful.

SF: Do you think your parents also pushed you in that direction?

MS: No, not at all. They neither encouraged nor discouraged me; I had to take jobs. But they knew I had talent and that that's what I wanted to do. There was no opposition. On the other hand, they weren't literary people—my mother was a music teacher, and my father was an engineer and worked in a factory. So they had no books about the place that I didn't bring in. My brother was more scientific.

SF: Do you think that childhood is important for writers?

MS: Yes, I think it is, because everything seems so wonderful that you see everything as being new. There's a poem of Traherne's—Thomas Traherne, the English mystic poet of the sixteenth century—that describes this feeling and in this poem he remembers his childhood and says, "The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting." It's the most beautiful bit. The wonder of childhood, at seeing things, seeing a field of corn—the excitement over quite little things. I suppose it's probably something that's clearer in retrospect, but even at the time I remember being aware of it because my mother used to *make* things exciting: "Oh look, there's a starling," or "Oh, look over at that."

SF: Your voice reminds me a bit of Maggie Smith's voice in the film version of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

MS: Does it? Maybe she listened to me talking.

SF: Did you see the movie?

MS: Yes. I thought it was wonderful.

Editor's Note: This interview took place in Paris in 1985.

SF: Have you seen any of the other movie adaptations that have been made of your books—*The Driver's Seat* or *The Abbess of Crewe*?

MS: *The Driver's Seat* was a good movie—in fact it was an artistic movie—but Elizabeth Taylor was badly cast as Lise. I thought of Lise as a big Nordic girl, a big German girl; the role just wasn't right for Elizabeth Taylor. There's too much flesh and health to her—it didn't look at all as if she was wanting to get a killer to kill her. She looks far too healthy to want to die.

SF: What do you think of the idea of adapting novels to the stage and films in general?

MS: I think it's a very good idea. But you musn't expect the same product to appear on the screen within two and a half hours as when one person in an armchair takes as long as he likes to read. It's *got* to change, and the only anxiety is that it's changed within the spirit of the original. But I've been lucky that way.

SF: Do you think you stuck to the spirit of the original when you based *The Abbess of Crewe* on Watergate?

MS: Oh yes. I thought the Watergate episode was very interesting, it was completely exaggerated. The Americans created a great big national thing of it, and I thought, well, if they lived in Europe and knew about corruption—all governments are corrupt—they would realize that it was like a nun's quarrel over a thimble. And Nixon was very foolish in his handling of the thing, trying to cover it up and then all those tapes that came out—it was too hilarious for words. So I thought, well, this is a nunnery, and Nixon's a nun, Kissinger is a nun, they're all nuns, and it's over a silver thimble—and I had some fun with that.

SF: To backtrack a bit, can you tell me something about what kinds of books you read when you were younger, that started getting you interested in writing?

MS: I read exclusively poetry. I used to go to the public libraries and borrow poetry.

SF: You've mentioned the trio of influences on your prose writing of Newman, Beerbohm and Proust—

MS: Yes, that was much later. That was around the fifties.

SF: Do you still feel that they were the most important influences on your work?

MS: No, I've now got into my own way of writing, and I influence myself. I have the machinery now, so I don't *need* to have prose influences. Also, there's a state of mind that goes with all forms of expression, all techniques; I noticed that when I wrote Beerbohm-like

pieces I would think like Beerbohm, because you have to *think* according to a prose style. A prose style is not just a decorator's piece of icing on the cake—it's a form of expressing a theme that can't be expressed any other way. Well, I have my own voice now.

SF: You've attributed finding your own voice as a writer to your conversion.

MS: I don't attribute it to that, but it coincided with it.

SF: Do you think that they're linked in any way?

MS: I think so, because finding my writing voice coincided with my becoming a Catholic. I think becoming a Catholic made me feel more confident, because it took care of a lot of problems. You know, it's a matter of when you're at sea you like to have a compass so you can know where the needle's pointing north, and then you can go on from there. That's what my conversion meant to me: *That's settled*, that's where I depart from, that's the north, the norm, and I can go around from that point.

SF: Then is it mainly in terms of a point of departure that you define your Catholicism?

MS: Largely, yes. It's very important to me to have a point of departure, because in the modern world nobody has any fixed belief or fixed idea of anything, and in a world like that a fixed point is very important. And it's not that I took it on for convenience—it's that I can't *not* believe that there is this norm. What other norm could there be, for someone brought up in the Western world, really wanting something? Whether we like it or not, the Christian-Judaic tradition that grew up around the Mediterranean dictates what we think is good and evil, and defines all of the absolutes that we hold to be important. The idea of Christ as an example, for instance, was terribly important to the whole development of the West—sociologically, morally, even politically. What would the slave liberation movement have been without it? But if you go over to the Islamic side, for instance, what have they got to teach us about love, about pity, about all the things that we hold precious? They've nothing at all. Therefore I hold, perhaps because I talk from within it, to this Judeo-Christian tradition. And looking around at all the splinter groups, like the Church of England, they don't have anything to offer that can at all compare with the Catholic Church.

SF: You once said, referring to your conversion, that "I had been reading toward it for years, and one wet afternoon I went and did it." Was it really as casual as you made it sound?

MS: No, it's just that sooner or later I knew that I would have to do

something about it. I don't remember if it really was a wet afternoon, but that's figuratively speaking.

SF: Did you see it as something that was the inevitable result of your development over a certain number of years?

MS: No, you know, I didn't *want* to become a Catholic, simply because there are a lot of things about the Catholic Church that I don't like. Most of it has to do with popular Catholicism: those terrible bleeding hearts, the saints, the Pope, priests—I don't like priests, for instance. I go to church but I go after the sermons, because the sermons are so bad I couldn't possibly listen to them. But that has absolutely nothing to do with the Church as a repository of the faith, which represents many of the truths we hold to be most important. I think everybody realizes that, even today. It has an effect. All the trimmings and carryings-on just for the masses—it's just like anything else. When the Pope goes around he might just as well be a football match, he draws enormous crowds, but the important thing is that people do feel that there's something here to honor. It's not the Pope himself, but there's something in what he represents that expresses their hopes, their aspirations—I don't think the Ayatollah Khomeini going around would draw crowds like that, except perhaps in Persia.

SF: Do you consider yourself a Catholic writer in the same sense that, say, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene are Catholic writers?

MS: No. Graham Greene is a different type of Catholic writer. I haven't discussed it with him so I'm not sure, but I have the impression that he's always on the verge of disbelief, and so he's constantly faced with a conflict. I don't have that conflict, because I can't *not* believe: I *couldn't* not believe.

SF: Is that an intellectual decision on your part?

MS: No, it's a total feeling. Belief is not intellectual; you believe something the way you say that's your mother, or that's your sister: it's a fact. It's something I've recognized, which *is*. So it's not a question of making any intellectual decision, but of coming to an understanding of this fact that is. Waugh, I believe, was a Catholic more by political commitment, and—I think—he absolutely believed in doctrines and dogmas. Graham Greene, I sense, has more of a feeling for the dramatic quality of good and evil, of belief and non-belief, salvation and damnation: I think he really feels all this. I get a sense that he has a conflict, which is terribly interesting.

SF: Do you think there's anything contradictory about being a Catholic and being a novelist?

MS: Well, Newman asked this question, and he said he didn't really see how anyone could write a novel without treating of evil, since if you write a novel you're writing about fallible human beings. But no, there's nothing antithetical about being a Catholic and a novelist, or a Catholic and anything. If you're a Catholic, you're a human being.

SF: Jacques Maritain said that he thought Catholics were in fact the best qualified people to write novels, because they have an understanding of what there is in man and can therefore write what he called "complete" novels.

MS: Well, I think Maritain was full of a bit of air, actually. But I see what he means. I can't help thinking that Christianity is the best religion, the religion that explains everyone to themselves. It's not one of the by-products, and it's a natural fulfillment of what man is supposed to be.

SF: Can I ask you about your background in Edinburgh, and what you think of it now looking back? Do you consider yourself very Scottish?

MS: I'm very Scottish, yes. I don't feel that much of a personal connection to Scotland anymore, because everything changes. But I know that I'm Scottish by formation. For instance, Scots have a work ethic, and I feel guilty if I don't work; I can watch other people lazing around and it doesn't worry me, but I like to work.

SF: Did you ever intend to go back to Scotland permanently, for instance when you got back to Britain from Africa in 1944?

MS: Well I had gone to Africa—to Rhodesia—in 1938 because my husband got a job there when I was engaged. So I went after him, got married there, and had a son. Then the marriage broke up, and I came home in 1944, but I didn't go back to Scotland because it was during the war, and I had to work in the Foreign Office. And when the war was over, I got another job and was settled in London, more or less.

SF: Did you plan on staying in England then?

MS: At that time, yes. But now—I like to go back to England, but I didn't want to stay there. You get to a point where you cannot express yourself fully in your own environment, you're never understood, you *want* to spread. And I got to be too well known in England—not exactly on the street, but I was quite well known—and you cannot get people to be normal if they know that you're a celebrated writer. You can't *see* life in its normality, people don't behave the same way. So it's better to go around where people

don't know who you are, where you can just be one of the people.

SF: Derek Stanford, in his critical biography of you—

MS: Oh yes. He gets everything wrong, I must warn you. Dates, names of books, everything.

SF: Did you know that he was going to write a book about you?

MS: No. I haven't seen him since about 1950, I suppose.

SF: Did you mind?

MS: Yes. You see, he doesn't know anything very much about me, he thinks he does, but he doesn't. So I had a little affair with him, what does he want? I haven't seen him now for about thirty years, but he still goes on writing—his "memoirs." It's embarrassing, but I do hope that nobody takes much notice. Besides, he can't write; his sentences are all very involved, it's like a snail.

SF: You once said that you saw yourself as a constitutional exile. Do you still feel that way?

MS: Yes, I do. I said it ceases to be a fate; it becomes a calling. And I don't know if you can really call me an exile, since exile means that you've been sent away. Machiavelli was an exile. Solzhenitsyn is an exile; I'm just a traveller, really. So I don't feel uncomfortable with it—actually I often think about leaving Italy, where I'm more or less settled, and I do go away quite a lot.

SF: Do you like living in Italy?

MS: Yes, very much. I rather like the Italians. There're quite a lot of British and Americans dotted here and there, and I've got lots of friends among the British and Americans in Rome. They're different when they've settled in Italy; they become English-speaking Italians, almost. It's very odd. But I have a lot of Italian friends, too.

SF: Do you think that living abroad does anything to cut a writer off from his public back at home?

MS: No, I don't. Perhaps it might have in the 18th or 19th century, when a writer's range of public was largely limited to English-speaking readers. But these days, exile or living away from home really doesn't mean a thing, because I also have a public in Russia, in Eastern Europe, in South America.

SF: Do you feel as though you have a genuine relationship to that public?

MS: Yes. Look here, I *am* in Paris concerning my books, the publication of my books. So I began to feel really very European. I have a European background anyway, on the Jewish side of my family—and being away from home is nothing alien to Jews, who

moved around all their lives. So I don't feel outside of anything; I don't feel disoriented. I think if I went to Africa, or South America, or Australia, I might feel disoriented, more than in Italy or France. But today, with quick travel, television, all the things we know about each other—I don't think you can compare the traveller of the past with the writer today. Writers like Shelley and Byron, for instance, got away from England for liberty, freedom of behavior—and also they lived more cheaply, I suppose, although that certainly wasn't Byron's problem. For him it was a love of adventure, and he was also exiled because he'd already made love to his sister, he was thrown out of England, practically. One way or another there were very good reasons why those people should be exiled. As I say, I'm not an exile so much as a traveller.

SF: Waugh once said that he thought the writer, the artist, should "stand out against the tenor of an age and not go flapping along; he must offer some little opposition." Do you think it's true that the relationship of a writer to his community, or his age, should be one of opposition?

MS: Oh yes, no doubt. Some opposition and some innovation, I would say. Otherwise he's not an artist; he might just as well be a copyist. There's no point unless you *have* something—unless you can improve on society the best thing you can do is to keep quiet.

SF: You once said that travelling puts you in a position to write better in opposition to the world.

MS: Yes, you know what you're writing about better when you travel. I think I know more about the English from the ones I meet abroad than I do sometimes in their own setting. It's like taking a picture and putting it in another frame: you see an altogether different aspect.

SF: Do you think it makes any difference to a writer to live in a country where the language is not his own?

MS: No, I don't think so. It depends what language, perhaps. But all Latin languages are the basis of English. Besides, with a new language comes a new thought process, always, and this helps you to understand *how* people think—their language is an expression of their thought process, which is different from one's own, and this is a help to understanding people. On the other hand, I like to hear English spoken a lot, and I go back to England at least once a year, sometimes twice.

SF: One of your characters, Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent*,

mentions at one point how her imagination is more aural than visual—something that Evelyn Waugh also said. Do you feel that way?

MS: Oh yes, absolutely.

SF: Is that something that British writers tend to feel more than Americans?

MS: No, I think it's more true of poets. All poets hear inner voices—words, sentences—rather than seeing visualized scenes. Dramatists visualize scenes. Henry James visualized everything he saw: everything was scenic.

SF: Quite a few reviewers have seen your novels as cold and overly intellectual. Do you think that's a valid criticism?

MS: I think my work is detached, yes. I don't go in for emotional things much. By intention. But I don't mind writers writing about emotions as long as they're precise about them. What I don't like is mush. To say that a character screams three times doesn't tell you *anything* about a character.

SF: What about the criticism that there are no portraits of successful emotional relationships in your novels, except perhaps in *The Mandelbaum Gate*?

MS: Even in *The Mandelbaum Gate* I don't see that there's any successful relationship—or if there is, it's peripheral, really, to the story. No, I don't *deal* with men and women and love. It's not that I see it as irrelevant—although sometimes it *is* irrelevant—but I don't see that the relationship between men and women is very good these days. And in any case it's not my subject. Emotional attachments between men and women would be the thing that appealed to me if I were writing about them, and I do bring it in, I take it as a matter of course that people, men and women, are attracted to each other. It's just not what I'm writing *about*. But in some of my novels I have husbands and wives who are perfectly all right. And anyway, there are no “happy” situations—everything is mixed. Nobody is happy for three months on end, it's the human condition. It's not possible.

SF: In your play *Doctors of Philosophy* all the male characters are named Charlie; is that meant to suggest that you see all men as equally superfluous?

MS: That was really a point of stylization, because it was a women's play: it was about women and their problems, whether they go to the university and become scholars or whether they give it up for marriage and children. But I didn't mean to make a philosophical state-

ment about men—it's only that men are irrelevant for the purposes of the play.

SF: What about in your novels?

MS: I find women most interesting, really—especially strong women, strong bossy women. I'm not sure I do men so well. But there are also quite a lot of diabolic men: Sir Quentin Oliver, in *Loitering with Intent*, and in *The Comforters*, my very first book, there was Baron Stock.

SF: I've always had the impression that the energy of your novels comes from these strong, diabolic characters who impose their wills on other people.

MS: Oh yes, I think so. In fact I like to go on and on and see how far they'll go. The main thing is to be honest, to follow an idea through, wherever it's taking you—and not to say, oh, my nice gentle lady readers won't like *this*.

SF: Do you ever find your characters doing things you don't expect?

MS: I never expect anything, because I begin a book without any clear idea of where I'm going. I make it up as I go along, largely. However, I think about the *theme* a long time beforehand; I think about the environment and the theme. I don't write regularly or systematically, but I do work every day: something *about* the book, something toward it. And I'm very particular: you know, supposing I said the fifteenth of August, 1952, it was raining, well I do look it up to see if it was raining at that spot on that day. I'm very scrupulous, extremely. And if I don't look it up there's always some reader who will remember that day, and who will write to tell me that in fact it was raining.

SF: So you think that kind of detail is important?

MS: Yes, because it's authentic. And then within that realistic framework I can do what I like with the unreal. I play around a great deal with time, for instance; in some of my books I do away with time altogether. What interests me about time is that I don't think chronology is causality: I don't think that the cause of things necessarily comes hours, moments, years *before* the event; it could come after, without the person knowing. For instance in *Not to Disturb*, the servants know absolutely beforehand what's going to happen, before the people in the room even suspect. They're arguing it out and then they shoot each other and everything, but the servants absolutely know: they're even arranging who's going to inherit what. This is not realism, you know. In *The Driver's Seat* Lise

knows exactly what she's going to do, although she sniffs around a lot, looking for it—but in fact she's just going straight to see a man who's got tendencies to kill, and he will kill her. In the end she just goes up to him and says, "You're coming with me," it's nearly midnight by that time. *The Driver's Seat* is a book about that sort of destiny-driven creature: a girl who didn't realize what she was doing, but who was in fact going direct.

SF: Do you think most people are driven toward violence the way she is?

MS: I don't know. Not everyone creates his own end, I don't think. But violence and suffering are there, lurking everywhere, and of course death is inevitable—I think life would be insipid without it.

SF: Do you find yourself attracted to violence, that is in the intellectual sense?

MS: Yes, I'm quite fascinated by violence. I read policiers, detective stories, all that sort of thing, and I think a lot of life is violent. A lot of my novels don't have violence, but sometimes it's necessary: you can't have novels without violence. For instance, in a lot of romantic novels—take Daphne Du Maurier's—there's violence all over the place. But she weeps a lot over it, it's very romantically presented. And generally speaking you find more violence in love story novelists, taking extreme cases. I don't know if you've ever read Barbara Cartland, but her books are full of violence, men whipping brides and, oh my God, this is the romantic thing carried to its absurdity. I'm a classicist. But this attitude of stating everything calmly is very much in the British tradition, you know, Wilkie Collins and so on; it's not invented by me. Traditionally authors have set their violence in a certain frame: for instance Emily Brontë, a romantic novelist of great genius, would have a storm raging while the thing's going on. I just do it in the calm. But it makes no difference to the fact of it.

SF: John Updike once said in a review of *The Bachelors* that he thought your novels lacked a compelling portrait of the good, and that without that it was difficult to provide a convincing portrait of evil. Do you think that's true?

MS: Well I think it depends on what you mean by a portrait of the good. In that novel there was a young Irishman who was very devoted to this girl who was going to be killed by another man if he hadn't happened to have been sent to jail. The Irishman saved her life, really. I don't know whether John Updike has given us a con-

vincing portrait of the good, mind you; his characters are just in and out of bed all the time.

SF: Have you used much of your own experience in your novels, aside from the obvious ones like *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*?

MS: I tend to take chunks of my life, but I never do it absolutely photographically. I tend to take a chunk and do that *area*. Sometimes I transpose it in time, and fill in about living in this place, or in that boarding house, like in *The Girls of Slender Means*, that sort of thing. Once I wrote a novel from a dream, entirely. That was *The Public Image*. I had been in Rome, and then I was back in New York, and I was going to move to Rome—I dreamt the whole thing in New York, and when I arrived in Rome I wrote the book. It was the easiest book I ever wrote.

SF: You once said in an interview with Frank Kermode that “things just happen, and then one records what has happened.” Isn’t that a slightly disingenuous account of what takes place in the writing process?

MS: Well, I gave that interview a long time ago. Things *do* happen, and one records what has happened, but what I meant was a mental event of one’s own. It’s not journalistic; it’s not like being an observer or a passive medium for recording events. But one is a magnet when one is writing books: obviously one’s mind concentrates very hard in a certain field, and one’s unconscious mind is probably working on it, and it appears that things happen that wouldn’t normally happen. One is a magnet for the experience one needs. I don’t think that one *is*, but it *appears* to be so, I suppose because one notices things which one would otherwise ignore.

SF: Where do you live mostly now?

MS: In Tuscany, at the moment, because Penelope* has a big house there, and I can have the whole top floor. It’s a charming place, really, about 200 kilometers from Rome, two and a half hours. In Rome I have my flat, but I work mostly in Tuscany, in a big room with a wooden table on two trestles. I like a big long table, so I can put dictionaries on it, a sandwich, a cat. . . .

SF: You once said, in your essay “The Poet’s House,” that you’d never met a really good writer who lived in high style. Do you still feel that way?

*Penelope Jardine, the English sculptor who had accompanied Mrs. Spark to Paris.

MS: Do you mean in how it applies to me? Well I *have* had a very stylish flat. But no, I've never really lived in high style, I just left big space, or made a group of sitting spaces in a corner, that sort of thing. At the moment I don't live in style, I've got a slum. But it's awfully nice inside. No, I still think there's no living a really stylish social life, arranging everything, doing the flowers, having people to dinner, sitting them in their proper order, and being a writer: of course you can't do that. I've never met anyone who could do the two. Somehow, you go into a house and you know it's an artist's house, without them trying, you just know. There's no way of keeping tidy or anything, for instance.

SF: You said earlier that you don't write realism. What would you call it?

MS: I don't know what it is. It's certainly not realistic, you would never say that they were realistic novels, although I do try to get an accurate background. Realism has come to mean something rather stark, anyway it's a category of literature that doesn't really mean "the real." Social realism, for instance, is what Russian writers like to do, are forced to do.

SF: Would you call what you were doing in *The Driver's Seat* that kind of realism—is that what you meant when the narrator says he has no idea what Lise is thinking, were you just trying to say *what happened*?

MS: Yes, God knows. In that book it wasn't for the author to say. There's always an unseen presence in novels, even if they're written in the first person, and that unseen presence is the author who's writing it. The personality of the narrator who begins at one place rather than in another, for instance, and that's me. And you have to change this every time, because if not you're just doing the same book over and over again. For that novel it was from the point of view of someone who doesn't know what anyone is thinking, but who can see, who can observe. Another novel might be from the point of view of the characters' thoughts: you're either God, or you're a fly on the wall, or you're something else; it doesn't matter. But you have to take a position before you begin. That's the most difficult part of a novel: finding the tone, deciding who the unseen, invisible narrator *is*, and what role he's going to play for this particular book. You've got to consider then the theme, and what type of narration will best fit that theme and technique. I've got to think about this quite a lot before I begin. But once having begun, you've really got to stick to it, and be consistent. That's the most important thing.

SF: You said earlier that you thought the essential thing in writing was to be honest, for example to follow a particular character through to his end—

MS: To be honest about everything.

SF: Do you see any contradiction between that kind of honesty and the fact of writing novels, which are basically lies?

MS: No, because having invented a character you have to be absolutely honest *about* the character, without worrying that people won't like it or that you're going too far. But if you're going to stick absolutely to literal truth, there's no point in writing novels, or in telling the story of Little Red Riding Hood, because Little Red Riding Hood did not exist. Sooner or later you've got to realize that you're working in a medium of parable, allegory, symbol—this is *symbolic* truth. Within that, you can do anything you like.

SF: Then do you think symbolic truth is more important than literal truth?

MS: No, literal truth in a court of law is the most important. And for everyday life, literal truth is absolutely indispensable, so we don't fool each other, and trick each other—otherwise society can't go on. But it isn't the only truth, otherwise nobody would read novels.

SF: Then you don't see anything morally reprehensible in the way novelists use reality to make stories—the way Fleur Talbot uses the people around her for her own novel in *Loitering with Intent*, for example?

MS: No, because I think she was in a position where people just came her way. She was already writing the story, and it was the sort of situation I was talking about, when you're writing something and people just seem to walk into your life. I've had that experience. But she didn't use them literally, and she very much opposes what Sir Quentin was doing, which was getting a literal autobiography and calling it fiction. *She* was jazzing it up, to make it more interesting; what disgusted her was that he was calling fiction autobiography, and she understood the distinction between them. A good fiction writer knows the distinction between fiction and truth better than anyone else.

SF: Do you read much contemporary fiction?

MS: I do now, yes. I like Heinrich Böll a great deal, and I like Sciascia, the Italian. I used to read a lot of Robbe-Grillet, and I get anything of Graham Greene's, because he's a superb story-teller. But younger people—I haven't read anything very much lately that was very exciting. I like Cynthia Ozick, I think she's a very in-

teresting writer, extremely lively and eloquent. And I like this new tendency of literature about literature, I really love it. I thought *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco was awfully good, by the way.

SF: Do you think it's a good or useful thing for readers to want to know something about writers and what they think, how they compose their novels, whether they use an electric typewriter or a MacIntosh computer?

MS: I think it's got very little to do with their work: some live very stodgy and regular lives, others are very wild. Unless they're writing purely autobiographically, it really hasn't very much effect on the quality of their work. Right now there's a big upsurge of writings about Eliot and his early life. But it doesn't make a bit of difference to the end result; there's nothing in his life that can explain the poetry. If you were told that he lived an exemplary life, and had been a bank clerk all his life, instead of just for a time, the poetry would still be there, and no more explicable in terms of what he was or did. There's no scientific way in which you can say, If a writer lives this way the end result will be better than if he lives that way. After the work's done you can say, This was his life, and it shows here and there in his work. But if it hadn't been that it would have been something else. For a good writer, anything is reflected.

SF: Do you think it's dangerous for a writer to get wrapped up in his public image of himself—what Blaise Cendrars called “falling victim to his own legend”?

MS: Yes. But I haven't had the temptation because I'm not quite so celebrated as all that; I'm not a television star or anything. I do know a writer who is a television star and it is a great danger to his work. But I think it's inevitable that television, for instance, should focus on writers' personal lives, because very few viewers of television are interested in much else, since they don't read. Unless the writer is a name and has a whole interesting life of his own, or marries interesting people, or becomes political, they're not very interested. Look at Gore Vidal, he's a politician—he's a *great* television star, extremely witty and very funny. He's a jolly good essayist, but he'd be a better novelist perhaps if he didn't have that myth always pulling at him. But then he's tempted to go on television because he *is* political, he's got something to say. And it probably fulfills some part of his personality that writing alone wouldn't do.

SF: On the other side of that question, do you think it helps or hurts a writer to be put into a position where he had to justify his work to his public?

MS: I think it's good to have to justify your work to the public, because it's the public who buys it, reads it. If the book is not itself justification enough then I suppose an explanation doesn't hurt. It depends which public, and my own reading public is a largely literary one; it isn't the great big vast reading public, or the paperback readers. But there's a certain point at which if people don't understand your work, you can't concede anything to them, you can't explain. They have to take it or leave it. If they really get annoyed I offer them their money back.

SF: Are there any one or two of your books that you look back on with particular pleasure?

MS: Well I'm always really rather absorbed with the book I'm writing at the moment—it's much the most important thing to me, and my whole life *fills* with it, there are potentials for that book in everything I see. So it tends to be the one I'm working on that I like the best.

SF: In *The Comforters*, Caroline Rose mentions at one point that she's writing her novel partly in order to combat the idea that "we're all courteous maniacs, discreetly making allowances for everyone else's derangement"—to overcome a feeling of intellectual isolation. Does that have anything to do with why you write novels?

MS: Yes, it's a way of communicating that a shy person can use to overcome—art may in fact be just *that*. It's possible—I don't know, because I'm not an analyst—but it's possible that the artist is *made* by an absolute personal need to communicate. I can communicate much better with the page I'm writing, knowing it's going to go out to unknown people, than I can at a cocktail party, for instance; I feel happier communicating that way. And I think that literature does have an effect, it does change people's lives—it always has, look at the Bible. Literature has changed countless lives, it's going on all the time.

VARIETY

David Twersky

THE SECOND LIFE OF LEON TROTSKY

Watching the film *Reds*, reading Orwell, I have been thinking about those who made a mark on their time early in their lives and then left the scene, abandoning the political culture to twist its way onward. Their lives-not-led impoverish us down the decades, leaving us contending, like distant relatives laying rival claims to a last will and testament, over the unsolvable riddle at the heart of their legacy: what would they have become?

John Reed's good friend, Max Eastman, whom Leon Trotsky had the great fortune to acquire as his English-language translator, fled rightwards, ending up as a contributing editor to that Bible of Babbitry, *Reader's Digest*. Eastman also wrote for a while in the fifties for William Buckley's *National Review*, eventually breaking with that engaging conservative coterie over God: Eastman might be as anti-communist as the next guy, the next guy at the *Review* being fellow onetime Trotskyite James Burnham, but still clinging to the atheism of his heady Greenwich Village days, he would not believe in God.

John Dos Passos, another former left-wing radical turned conservative, anticipated Joni Mitchell christening the sixties generation the "Woodstock Nation," when he split America into "two nations" in protest at the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. The same Dos Passos described the difference between communists and socialists as the difference between beer and near-beer: the "communists really mean it." By 1964, however, Dos Passos, as Daniel Bell once pointed out, had abandoned alcohol altogether and was pushing for prohibition: that was the year he enthusiastically endorsed Barry Goldwater for President. In this illustrious list, one should not neglect Walter Lippman, Reed's Harvard classmate, who graduated rather quickly from university socialism to the Olympian heights of the Washington establishment.

The rightward drift of so many of Reed's friends is suggestive, if not absolutely convincing proof, of the directional flight of the zeitgeist. Reed might have followed the well-travelled route from

questioning to criticism to left-wing opposition—after all, Trotsky praised *Ten Days that Shook the World* in *History of the Russian Revolution* for Reed's ability to see, hear and faithfully record what was going on around him. Even Warren Beatty puts some creeping doubt into his characterization of Reed, which he bases on disputes with Zinoviev. Of course, if Reed was falling out with Zinoviev, could he have survived Stalin with his faith as a communist intact?

Along the same lines of inquiry, Norman Podhoretz has insisted that if George Orwell were alive, he would have renounced his democratic socialism for Podhoretz's neoconservative faith. Is Orwell turning over in his grave at the suggestion, or chuckling to himself in heaven? The question is not only of theological import. How Orwell's powerful and original mind would have dealt with the events of the sixties and seventies, with the de- and re-Stalinization of Russia, the rise of the American New Left, and Vietnam, is a fascinating subject for speculation; and laying claim to his legacy by one or another contemporary intellectual/political camp is a useful ploy. Podhoretz is mobilizing history in order to argue that other backsliding liberals and leftists can "come over" safe in the knowledge that they pursue the inner logic of Orwell's blessing, according to Norman.

For many of the intellectuals on the move from Stalin, Leon Trotsky provided a temporary shelter, a kind of halfway house for revolutionists on the run. The fact that he was an intellectual and Jewish (and therefore outsider both to the revolution and to the Jews), and had lost but still stood for the revolution unbetrayed, all combined to create an attractive space for those independent minds not blinded by the horrors of the Nazis or the horrors of Stalin.

Trotsky himself lived a full life, richer and more colorful than any ten ordinary people (although he would have hotly contested the existence of "ordinary people"). Still, it is interesting to speculate on the possible developments of his extraordinary, though fallible, intellect as it took in the crushing of fascism and the entrenchment and evolution of Soviet (Stalinist) power, not to mention the collapse of Marxism, so unthinkable in the first part of the century, as a viable ideological framework and guide.

With the final defeat of his dreams and schemes would he, the most public of men, have withdrawn from the platform of history to a private solitude? Would he have clung like a drowning man to the rotting life raft of dogma, or might he have allowed for history's bag

of ironic surprises; could he admit that the world had changed radically from 1905 to 1945 and in admitting this then change his analysis?

Once we get our imagination going, why stop with the “correct position” on state socialism and the historical role of the working class? What would Trotsky, along with Bukharin one of the few of the Bolshevik old guard genuinely concerned with literature and the arts, have made of the Beats? (Can’t you see Ginsberg on a pilgrimage to the Old Man, preparing an interview for *Evergreen Review*? “What I most regret is the stupid suburban revolutionism, my ego, the electric draw of the platform and the crowds in 1905 and the Petrograd soviet in 1918.”)

Had he survived into the next decade, what would he have made of the fatally blurred lines separating high art from kitsch and high politics from theater, so characteristic of the sixties? What would Trotsky—né Bronstein—have thought of the remarkable fall and rise of the Jewish people, his biological and cultural, if not intellectual, root in history; of the descent into the Holocaust and ascent to the State of Israel?

In *Trotsky and the Jews* by Joseph Nedava, one of the few intellectuals of the annexationist right in Israel, the author argues that “under the changed circumstances brought about by the establishment of the State of Israel . . . Trotsky . . . had he lived . . . would have subscribed to the Zionist solution.”

In his slender volume on Trotsky, Irving Howe, while familiar with Nedava’s speculations, refuses to indulge himself. Howe does see a “new uncertainty” in “Trotsky’s hesitant and groping statements on the Jewish question . . . a feeling that it would no longer do to keep repeating the old ‘positions’.”

What of it? Did Trotsky in fact soften his position with regard to Zionism? Might he have turned from opponent to friend, even participant? And if he had, would people have regarded him as a prodigal son returned from a lifetime adventure abroad, or as a lonely and defeated old man turned in upon himself in search of illusory metaphysical comfort in the face of death?

In this fantastic might-have-been, Trotsky survives the assassination bid against him in Coyoacan in August 1940. The ice pick grazes his skull, and he is briefly hospitalized in Mexico City. There is some mention in the press of the attempt for a few weeks but then, like most new stories, it fades away with the newsprint. (The failed assassination has to compete for headline space on the international

pages with the fall of France, Roosevelt's reelection and speculation on the fate of the German/Soviet nonaggression pact which Trotsky had identified as Stalin's reward for betraying the Spanish republic. About Spain, there was no longer any need to speculate.)

Ramon Mercador, the unlucky assassin, is shot while attempting to escape from prison, although it is hardly likely that he wanted to escape: better the protective Mexican cell than the wrathful "welcome home" from the employer he has failed. Thus, he is denied the ignominious footnote in history he might otherwise have earned. As he carried no identification, within a few months even his face is forgotten. (In both real life and in this version, Mercador, of course, was not the first assassin sent to Trotsky. Another went on to become a professor of sociology in the United States, author of a successful book romanticizing the Jewish *shtetl*.)

The Soviet Embassy hotly denies any connection to the affair. Although no one believes them, the worst they suffer is a joke, at Stalin's expense, about the efficiency of socialism. Two months later, Trotsky is back at his desk, posting missives, theories, analyses and justifications to loyalists in different countries, especially the United States. There, he is engaged in a difficult polemic with the diminishing band of his followers about the precise nature of the Soviet Thermidor, an image many no longer find adequate.

With the end of the war, the Soviets are everywhere more powerful, although the price exacted from the Soviet peoples (the old soviet man?) remains terrible. Stalin, in any event, never shrunk from inflicting the cost of his ambitions on others. The question regarding Trotsky, it should be remembered, concerns what he, Trotsky, would have done had he been in power. After all, he had opposed the rightist moderate tendency of Bukharin. He and Preobrazenski had demanded a swift industrialization at the expense of the peasants, the "left" policy ultimately adopted with such a vengeance by Stalin. He. . . . But he would have not have gone *that* far. Who was it who remarked that Stalin made all the other Bolshevik leaders look liberal in comparison?

Stalin, meanwhile, like Sauron the Dark in *Lord of the Rings*, trains his third eye always on Trotsky, wary lest the founder of the Red Army slip back and break his power. Too bad he's still alive. Even if at present it remains too dangerous to try again to break that damned Jewish skull, so hard it broke the pick, there's no need to leave him be. Stalin, who never avoided practicing the bourgeois arts of deception in defense of the revolution, who once bought the

catch of a fleet of foreign fishing vessels in order to expedite Trotsky's exit from Finland, continues to weave a tangled web.

The Nazis are swept into the dustbin of history, increasingly crowded with discarded theories and collapsed empires. Trotsky, who had railed at Nazi "barbarism" is, in the event, shocked at its utter and depraved savagery. It was beyond "degenerated capitalism," just as some of his American friends were (mistakenly) maintaining that Stalin's country had gone beyond a "degenerated worker's state." Of the idea of a socialist state, it was hard to let go, even now.

It is 1947. Trotsky receives Mexican General Gomez, in charge of national security. Gomez is bespectacled, of medium height, and appears well read. He admires the cracked leather bindings on the many books which line the walls. The library is Trotsky's semiportable homeland.

The general looks for a book he has read or heard of so that he can strike up a conversation with his host. Trotsky sees the general's discomfort and, as he asks his secretary (an American) for coffee (tea for himself), he invites the general to explicate some point of little concern in the Mexican political situation. They speak about this for a few minutes, and Gomez is surprised by the depth of Trotsky's grasp of local affairs. They speak of France, a country Gomez has visited and, of course, of Spain. Gomez doesn't support Franco—who does?—but what's done is done, after all, the war is over.

Against all of his instincts, roughly hewn by years of security work, and despite the fact that it makes his job that much more difficult, Gomez discovers that he likes the man.

Finally Trotsky, trained by instinct and experience to suspect the worst, as good as asks him why he has come.

Gomez carefully puts his coffee cup down. It is the Russians. They are very powerful since the war, oh, not all-powerful, but still. . . . There is trouble in some factories and in some remote provinces—unions and Indians. The government faces a complex series of challenges and cannot, that is, does not seek to invite the additional stress of a major conflict with domestic Soviet surrogates.

Trotsky, reduced, he muses, to planning the counter-revolution against the workers and the peasants, understands that his decade-old stay in Mexico is over. Trying to conceal his surprise, anger, fear, he asks, "How long do I have?" Gomez is visibly relieved that they have come to the point. "It is not Gomez's fault," Trotsky reminds himself, "I have no right to be surprised." "It is not my fault," Gomez reminds himself.

In the time remaining him in Mexico, Trotsky writes to James Cannon in New York and John Dewey to try and obtain a United States visa. It takes only a few weeks to receive the thundering “No” from Washington. London has also refused. It quickly becomes clear that Leon Trotsky, leader of two revolutions, orator extraordinaire, thinker and revolutionist, has nowhere to go.

Some of his old friends in America organize a petition to overturn the State Department decision. Despite the letter to Cannon, Max Schachtman sees what he can do, which isn’t very much. Even Max Eastman joins in. Arguing with his new conservative friends for his old teacher, he tries, but fails—the New Deal days are over. After a generation of defeat, the conservatives smell blood. The liberals are worried: they may lose the White House. This is the last thing they need. Is he ready to recant? Would he testify about Red spy networks? No? Too bad.

Within the old left-wing community, he is still hated by the fellow travellers and party members. Among his old friends and followers, there is still affection, admiration. But there are increasing signs of criticism: why, exactly, the attack on Kronstad? Would it really have been so different if he would have won? Would Djugashvili be today in Coyoacan? Old friends drift away. Even his formidable intellectual power gradually loses its gravitational hold. One splinter party in New York is dangerously close to renouncing everything back to the beginning; like Darwin and Freud, their heresy begins with creation. Moreover, everywhere his few remaining followers are harried by official Communists.

As his correspondence draws out his days, he finds that he anxiously awaits each day’s mail. He comes to know the mailman and chats with him every morning. Fewer and fewer letters arrive. His face grows as thin as the mail sacks. His former secretary, Dunayevskaya, is busying herself over “state capitalism,” an error. If the Soviet state had “degenerated” under Stalin, Trotsky nonetheless regarded it as a “workers’ state,” the first in human history, and deserving of support. Trotsky would depart from this position only far enough to qualify his support as “critical.”

Dunayevskaya’s mistake was to write the Soviet Union off as an altogether new form of social organization, unanticipated in Marxist eschatology. Schachtman was experimenting along similar lines, ultimately rejecting the state capitalist description for his own original “bureaucratic collectivism.” From that point of departure, his party colleague James Burnham moved on to his own new paradigm

pointing to management, rather than ownership, as the key factor in the control of an economic system. Unlike Dunayevskaya, Schachtman and his faction lent Moscow "critical support" during the war, opposing American participation in what seemed to them not a war to destroy Nazism but to save the British Empire, until the Wehrmacht, violating Molotov-Ribbentrop, crossed over into the workers' homeland.

All together a depressing, fragmented picture. Perhaps it would have been better if Trotsky's secretary had not found the gun that night, if he . . . dangerous thoughts, weak thoughts. But the orthodox do not understand the gravity of the doctrinal crisis, a church faced with a second coming, Satan, he means Stalin, disguised as the Messiah.

One morning, after Gomez has been round to call again—a gentle hint—a letter arrives that surprises him. It is not in response to any of his. It is from a close friend of Bebe Idelson, a leader of the Jewish labor movement in Palestine with whom he met in 1937. He recalls his feelings, mixed, ambivalent, after the three-hour talk with her. The "social democrat only" and man of the world was drawn, against his own nature, to the Jewish woman from Palestine. They met at Diego Rivera's house, at a press meeting, and returned to his study. His wife joined them. He asked about everything: culture, youth, politics, especially politics, kibbutzim, the unions. "Speak a little Hebrew," he requested. He felt no hostility, even a hint of admiration. If they remained in error, it was error transformed into necessity by the darkness of fascism and the failure of socialism. If "the question of [his] Jewish origin had acquired importance only after [he] became a symbol for political baiting, [derived] from the petit bourgeois reaction to October," the Nazis had given it new importance and new meaning. The Jews, millions of them, lay on the principal invasion route, should (and wouldn't they?) the Nazis go for Moscow. There would be mass killing. He has come to see darkness in the heart and is glad to find light, scattered and localized.

Now, years later, a bloodbath like no other, Idelson is still a power in the movement. Having read of his situation in a letter from a cousin in New York, she has gone to Ben-Gurion to speak of it. She hopes Trotsky will forgive her for breaking her oath of silence, for he had asked her not to speak of their meeting. The "Old Man"—Trotsky has to read the sentence over a few times before he realizes she is referring to Ben-Gurion—is of the opinion that Trot-

sky should live out his remaining years in Israel. Hadn't Idelson offered him a haven in Palestine in 1937? "Aren't you frightened of me?" he had asked then. "No," she had replied, "because our idea is stronger even than you." Within a few months—could he hold out that long?—the British would pull out and the Jewish state, if it could survive the pangs of birth, would come into being. Trotsky replies immediately.

He rings Gomez and asks for time. The General understands. "An interesting solution, *monsieur*," Gomez congratulates him. Evidently his mail is monitored. "You shall have your time." Despite his misgivings, his ideological reluctance gives way before the harsh reality: he must move. He must decide.

Four months later in June 1948, he leaves Mexico forever. In similarly worded editorials accusing him of ancient villainies, *Pravda*, the *Daily Worker*, *L'Humanité* denounce him. Compared to the invective hurled at him in the thirties, this is kid stuff. The Nazis are gone: with whom shall he conspire? White Guardists? After all, Gromyko, that pygmy, was the most eloquent voice in the United Nations (United Imperialists) for the establishment of a Jewish National Home. After that Zionist speech, what do they want from him?

It was the fear of an outburst like this which had prompted him to ask for Idelson's silence in 1937. And to many, the official accusations again appear plausible. He is accompanied by bodyguards on the boat: they fear an assassination at sea. In fact, this is justified paranoia: Trotsky does have enemies. Beria, drawing up various scenarios, actually proposes a wet operation in the water. Inexplicably, the "Georgian mountaineer" turns him down in a rage. Men are pushed out of windows in Prague and of the old Bolsheviks, those who actually knew Trotsky, few are left. (Shapiro, Conquest, and Medvedev list all those killed and when.) Young Soviet pioneers would not recognize Trotsky if they saw him; his face has been expunged from their history, erased from memory, although they are familiar with his name and his alleged villainy. But some instinct keeps Stalin's hand away from Trotsky. Although he has no reason to fear him any longer, he does. He cannot risk another failure. And for reasons much greater than this fossilized feud with an old fool, he is supporting Israel, allowing arms sales through Czechoslovakia, hoping to get Britain out of Suez.

En voyage, the worst thing that happens is that Trotsky is bed-ridden for almost a week with seasickness. How Plekhanov would

have loved it: a "Zionist with seasickness." He thinks of his life, of how his major interests lay elsewhere. He supposes much of his life will always seem locked in place, addressing the Petrograd Soviet, leading the attack across the ice. As he lies flat on his back, pale as a white sheet, the blue waters of the Mediterranean stretch out beyond his cabin windows, and he sails towards the land he had ignored and the movement about which he knew so little.

He has come to accept the existence, for a long time to come, of that which was once a heresy: a "Jewish nation." He has even made peace with the notion that "the nation cannot formally exist without a territory." He had not foreseen the so-rapid collapse of the British Empire. Still, the Arabs. . . .

So Trotsky, barely recovered, arrives in Haifa, a new immigrant to the Jewish state. Idelson is there to meet him alongside the woman who wrote the invitation, also journalists and photographers to catch this curious sight and immortalize it in their archives: the leader of the 1905 revolution, the creator of the Red Army, a refugee arriving home in Israel, an old man, bespectacled, disembarking in another foreign port. There is an interview soon in the Labor paper, *Davar*, and the liberal *Ha'aretz*. *The Palestine Post* runs a front-page story.

Recovering from the voyage and still suffering from what he calls "historical vertigo," Trotsky begins to explore his new environment. He cannot read Hebrew, but he is able to exploit the collective wisdom of the small circle of admirers, "tourists" and sycophants which gathers around him almost nightly.

Even with their eager help and perhaps because of it, Trotsky cannot make sense of the hothouse of Israeli political life. He recognizes the human types, but the context is so utterly original. The flora is misleadingly familiar to the eye, but the scent throws him off, and the unceasing noise of this small country, the pitch, and the tone, are utterly foreign.

Trotsky surveys the landscape. The left—he finds it difficult to reward nationalist factions with the coveted role of a vanguard party—is divided. But together the parties of the left completely dominate the Knesset and the labor federation. Israel's version of "dual power." Bourgeois, clerical, and fascist parties are isolated, although Ben-Gurion, in a complex, tactical shift, will co-opt the center-right to his first government, leaving the Marxist Mapam in the opposition. Ben-Gurion's social-democratic Mapai is already displaying worrying signs of retreat from even their own diluted ver-

sion of socialism. Left-Zionist Mapam is pro-Stalin in international affairs, as are the Communists. All in all, Trotsky is a round peg set loose on a board filled with square holes: he cannot fit in.

The debate between Ben-Gurion and Mapam about the Palmach provides the context for Trotsky's curious entrance on the political stage. The Palmach was organized before Rommel's defeat at El-Alamein when the Zionist leadership feared a German occupation of Palestine. With no budget, the new force relied on the *kibbutzim* for support. Naturally, many Palmach officers were recruited from the collective farms and their youth movements. But the Palmach's greatest strength, the *élan* and tightly knit camaraderie of these recruits, now proves its undoing. Ben-Gurion wants to consolidate the political militias—Palmach on the left, Irgun on the right—into one army, loyal to the state. Using a Palmach unit, he has already moved decisively to crush Irgun's independence, opening fire at a ship laden with arms purchased by Irgun in the waters off Tel Aviv. (Yitshak Rabin gave the order for the artillery to open fire. Menachem Begin narrowly escaped with his life. The *Altelena* went down. The Irgunists went down politically, into an isolation it took them thirty years to escape.)

Now Ben-Gurion was incorporating the Palmach into the new Israeli army. Palmach's officer elite were overwhelmingly Mapam-oriented, and Ben Gurion sees them as a potential threat from the left. He retires many of them from active service and refuses to promote others.

Palmach leaders and their Mapam commissars speak darkly of the dangers of a "state army" crushing strikes and quote Mao Tse-tung on the importance of a workers' militia. They see the disappearance of the Palmach as a further example of Ben Gurion's emergent *estatist* philosophy and as the beginning of the emasculation of the independent labor movement. (Soon the independent labor schools will be incorporated into a state-run public system. Of all their prestate institutions, only the Histadrut Sick Fund, *Kupat Holim*, will survive the "purge," a sad commentary on the health of Israeli socialism.)

Trotsky is baffled by his own reaction. Although sympathetic to the argumentation of the left, he supports Ben-Gurion. The creator of the Red Army, the crusher of Kronstadt, has had enough experience to understand that the revolutionary state must concentrate all power in its hands. His mistake had been to be outmaneuvered by that Georgian moustache. He did not fear that Ben-Gurion could

or even wanted to capture all power through a *putsch*. And not fearing a dictatorship, he prefers a powerful workers' state to an "independent workers' movement." He sees "independence" in this context as a euphemism for control by Mapam.

"Why give them by fiat what they failed to obtain on their own—the right to speak for the working class?" Trotsky surmises in his first public statement, released to the press four weeks after his arrival. *Davar* reprints the statement in full in the popular Friday edition.

But others choose sides against Trotsky. Not everyone has fond memories of the early years, before Stalin's Thermidor, of the Soviet state. Zionists whose activities were outlawed by decree of the *Yevsekzia*, an order signed by Stalin and Agursky (whose son will later move to a West Bank settlement as for that matter would Trotsky's grandson) recall that Trotsky did not oppose it. At that time, when Rabbi Maze had asked him to intercede on behalf of the Jews, he had demurred. "The Trotskys make the revolutions," the rabbi answered back, "and the Bronsteins pay for them." By what right, these people and others wanted to know, did he now come to a place whose birth he had done so much to abort? Although he was a victim of anti-Semitism, was he not at fault?

There were also grumblings on the Left. The tiny Communist Party loudly—as loudly as it could—opposed his coming. *Mapam*, then a not-insignificant left-Zionist party, was contesting the elections to Israel's new parliament, the *Knesset*. Reflecting a combination of several factors, their platform was unabashedly pro-Soviet: an assessment that the Soviet Union would soon emerge as the dominant power in the Middle East, a profound sense of gratitude for Soviet sacrifices during the great war, and a sincere Marxist dogmatism. (One day, they hope, Stalin will visit a kibbutz and realize his error in opposing socialist Zionism.) Although kibbutzim should be Trotsky's Israeli address, rather than the more moderate social democratic *Mapai* of his host, Ben-Gurion, their support for Stalin repels him; and they, for their part, want no part of him.

His arrival and presence become the subject through which a power struggle within *Mapam* works itself out into the open. Dr. Sneh, a recent proselyte of the left and full of the enthusiasm of the new convert, insists that such a man has no place in Israel. Hazan, a leader of the Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard) Kibbutz movement, does not go so far, although he reiterates his love for the Soviet "second homeland." Tabenkin, in whose veins the nationalist blood

runs reddest and thickest, says something to the effect that while he agrees to hang Jewish fascists in Israel, one should first fight to bring them there alive. (In 1967, after the war, Tabenkin helped found the Movement for Greater Israel, in the days before annexation of the West Bank by the right wing. Years later, Sneh's son Ephraim becomes Israel's military "governor" of the West Bank.) On Trotsky, not surprisingly, the leadership goes with Sneh.

Within six weeks, Mapam organizes the first demonstrations against Trotsky's presence in the country in Tel Aviv's Mugrabi Square. Idelson reassures him: Ben-Gurion has no intention of backing down. Trotsky is bemused that they should think he needs reassurances, he who. . . .

Ben-Gurion receives him shortly thereafter. Ben-Gurion is busy, as usual, with the infinite tasks of creating the new society. What a flash of recognition must have passed between them: Ben-Gurion filled with the details of newly-born Israel, Trotsky filled with memories of the infant Soviet state he had done so much to bring to life. Ben-Gurion wonders about his own future, his own Jewish skull, the endless and increasingly bitter infighting, the repeated self-imposed exile into the wilderness at Sde Boker, the split from the party, and history, finally, passing him by. About history passing history-makers by, Trotsky might have told him a thing or two.

With so much in common, small wonder the two do not get along. "Keep him away from me," Ben-Gurion tells his aides (who grow up to be mayors and presidents and prime ministers) after the meeting. As for Trotsky, he thinks Ben-Gurion is selling out the workers' movement, and does not neglect saying so in public, to a chorus of "ingrate" to his right and a deafening and embarrassed silence on his left. But he has nowhere else to go, geographically or politically.

After the Slansky trials and the split in *Mapam*, Trotsky and Hazan meet several times openly, and there is a kind of rapprochement. In his Tel Aviv flat awash with the clear blue light of the Middle Eastern summer, Leon Trotsky, né Bronstein, is, after a fashion, home at last.

There ends the fantasy. Trotsky did die in Coyoacan in August 1940, and we cannot know what might have happened had he lived. But I would like to end on a different note.

Trotsky, who doubted the possibility that the Zionist solution would work, failed to see the collapse of the British Empire. He did

see, however, the “tragic” situation of Arab and Jew, and this is hardly a mark against him. The question of Arab-Jewish relations remains paramount, and peace remains the ultimate and still unobtainable condition for the successful realization of Zionism.

Several years ago while visiting my cousin in Tel Aviv, not far from where Trotsky might have settled and next door, in fact, to where Max Brod (who saved Kafka from anonymity) died, I picked up a book and leafed through it. It was a Hebrew Bible—published in St. Petersburg in 1909. I asked her how she had obtained it, and she told me that Raya Dunayevskaya, née Shapiro, an old friend, had been Trotsky’s secretary in Mexico for a while and had found this book in his desk when he died. Although Trotsky studied the Bible “in the original” for a few months as a very young man, to please his father, I doubted that he was carrying one—or in possession of one—at the time of his death.

I wrote to Dunayevskaya, still a Marxist activist, now based in Detroit. She wrote back that the Bible had nothing to do with Trotsky, but was rather the result of a comical and successful ruse to get around the F.B.I. and establish her date of birth. As far as Trotsky was concerned, Dunayevskaya “imagine[s] that he would rather be caught dead than with a Bible in his hand.” Which he was. On the other hand, there was a connection between Dunayevskaya and Trotsky’s desk—but it involved a gun, not a Hebrew Bible. She was still with him in Mexico when his last son was murdered, “And I feared what the Old Man might do in that tragic situation, and removed the gun from his desk.”

So my cousin’s memory was (almost) correct. By the time of the assassination, Dunayevskaya was gone, breaking with Trotsky over the “state capitalism” theory of the Soviet Union she favored—he clung to the “degenerated workers’ state” theory which allowed for “critical support.”

In a letter to me, Joseph Nedava wrote that he believes things might indeed have worked as in our fantasy. But the final word belongs to my Tel Aviv cousin after all. In Nedava’s book, I read that a journalist for a New York Jewish newspaper, Jean Jaffe, who was also a friend of my cousin’s in the forties, was sent to Coyoacan after Trotsky’s death. There, in his desk, she found a bundle of letters in Hebrew and Yiddish, a correspondence about Palestine, wrapped in a Jewish calendar, separate from his archives, as if waiting to be translated and then read, with great care, by the bespectacled Old Man.

BOOKS

FREUD'S DAUGHTERS

MELANIE KLEIN: HER WORLD AND HER WORK. By Phyllis Grosskurth: Alfred A. Knopf. \$25.00

THE FEMINIST LEGACY OF KAREN HORNEY. By Marcia Westkott. Yale University Press. \$20.00.

Freud's earliest disciples were male, but soon psychoanalysis attracted a number of women who, like the men, came to cure their own neuroses and stayed on to become analysts. Like Freud, they wanted to know how their egos had been shaped in response to their eternal world, but they ended up examining how the place accorded to women in the world molded female personality. These were talented women, and many of them became the mainstays of psychoanalysis.

Sabina Spielrein, for instance, after having collaborated with Carl Jung in Zurich and then with Freud in Vienna, attempted to bring psychoanalysis to the Soviet Union; after her analysis in 1925/26 Alix Strachey helped start and support the British society; Eugenia Sokolnicka initiated the French society together with "the Princess" Marie Bonaparte in 1926; Helene Deutsch was in charge of candidates' training in Vienna as early as 1924. And by 1912, child pedagogy, beginning with Hermine von Hug-Hellmuth, was dominated by women who took it for granted that they ought to understand their charges' unconsciousness—long before child development became the centerpiece of psychoanalytic research. Clearly, Freud allowed women to compete as equals, and whatever chauvinism he was guilty of was cultural and theoretical rather than intentional. After his death Anna Freud became his official heir, and two of the most influential "dissidents"—Melanie Klein and Karen Horney—were women.

The books under discussion pay tribute to these two women. Westkott's *The Feminist Legacy of Karen Horney* outlines how Horney's insights might be useful to feminists; Phyllis Grosskurth's *Melanie Klein: Her World and Her Work* maps the life of a feminine rather than a feminist psychoanalyst. Both books address current preoccupations. Westkott responds to feminists who, until Juliet Mitchell argued in *Psychoanalysis and Women* (1977) that exploring the cultural elements of the Oedipus complex could be a boon to the women's

movement, maligned Freud as the male chauvinist *par excellence*. Grosskurth's biography of Melanie Klein comes at a time when her "baby," namely object-relations theory, has entered the American psychoanalytic mainstream—along with D. W. Winnicott's play therapy and W. D. Fairbairn's "inner reality." As expected, the reception of the two books has followed party lines: Westkott has been praised by feminists and ignored by Freudians of all stripes, while Grosskurth has been hailed by the intellectual public, ignored or attacked by ego psychologists, and taken to task by certain feminists and by British analysts, some of whose recollections she seems to have taken out of context.

In fact, both Karen Horney and Melanie Klein disagreed early with some of Freud's basic formulations, particularly with the concept of penis envy. Thereby, they attracted the fire of those who elaborated rather than questioned the increasing weight Freud put on ego psychology after 1923. Now, he postulated a distinctive developmental model for girls and introduced the importance of the pre-Oedipal phase—when the girl must make the complicated (unconscious) transition from loving her mother to loving her father. (This means she must have resolved this phase upon entering the Oedipal one). Horney took off from this essay in order to elaborate the significance of male-dominated culture, while Freud went on to explore its implications for pre-Oedipal experience.

Both Klein and Horney—like all the early psychoanalysts—based their theories upon personal experiences, and were attracted to psychoanalysis because it promised escape from male domination. By better comprehending their own psyches, Horney and Klein expected to understand the psyche of every woman. Still, they were products of their milieus: Klein, Jewish, born in Poland, brought up in Vienna and married in Hungary, studied (and practiced) psychoanalysis in Berlin before moving to England; Horney, born in Hamburg to a German mother and a Norwegian father, studied medicine and then taught psychoanalysis at the Berlin Institute for Psychoanalysis before moving to America. Both Horney and Klein were analyzed by Abraham. And both eventually went beyond the boundaries accepted by the classical Freudians. According to Alix Strachey, another of Abraham's patients, by 1925 Klein already had "demonstrated absolutely clearly that . . . children (from 2 and 3/4 upwards) were already wrecked by the repression of their desires and the most appalling *Schuldbewusstsein*." She im-

mediately was attacked by the Hungarians Franz Alexander and Sandor Rado, and defended by Abraham and Horney.

Horney, however, had her own quarrels with Abraham: he held that the pre-Oedipal girl, when realizing that she will never have a penis but will be able to have a child, starts to envy her mother and to wish for a child by her father. Instead, postulated Horney, the Oedipal girl identifies with her mother and then is pushed back into the pre-Oedipal phase by her father's inevitable rejection. This experience colors all future relationships with men: she reacts with "masculine" revenge and disappointment rather than with "feminine" passivity and submission. For Klein, however, the girl's defense against her own feminine tendencies is a result of the fear and resentment she feels toward her mother for having thwarted her true feminine needs, at the same time that she is "shuddering from congress with her father" (Grosskurth). Mother-daughter relations thus became the core of Klein's theory, as she pushed the roots of unconscious theory further back to the earliest experiences, including intrauterine ones. Horney, on the other hand, drew closer to the Freudo-Marxists and came to believe that social change eventually would allow for new female roles.

Essentially, Horney held that the formulations of female psychology originated in the male child's narcissistic response to the female body, to the "castration" and humiliation he fears, and that beneath the narcissistic glorification of the penis lurks the dread of the vagina. Somewhat later, she equated "penis envy" in girls with "womb envy" in boys, and then, to distinguish between female sexuality and "primary phallic sexuality," introduced the wish for children. But, when Horney recognized that this explanation did not serve the liberation of women in society, she moved on to reject her instinct theory.

Westkott, for the most part, bypasses Horney's biography and pursues her contributions to feminism alone. Still, she demonstrates how Horney's own experiences exemplified her theories: her father did not appreciate her intelligence and nearly kept her from attending the Gymnasium; she was expected to nurture her mother, "poor little Mutti," to defend her against her father's criticisms—while allowing herself to be mercilessly teased by him. Reading both Freud and Horney selectively, Westkott supports her thesis with feminist ones by Jane Gallop (*The Daughter of Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 1982), by J. Van Herick (*Freud, Femininity and Faith*,

1982), and by others who focused on how social norms manage to invade every girl's unconscious. Westkott then outlines how Horney's instinct theory differed from Freud's and how she increasingly emphasized the importance of culture just at the time when American Freudians embraced and elaborated ego psychology. Surely, their explorations of the roots of neurosis and their psychology of women were bound to be at loggerheads.

Westkott demonstrates that Horney changed her views when her patients were not being cured effectively, but ignores the fact that by then all analysts were groping for better techniques for handling the phenomenon of transference. Horney's *forte*, of course, was her social criticism, both in *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937) and in *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939). That was why she rejected penis envy once again—as yet another means of explaining women's anger at husbands who wanted to keep them “obedient and infantilized.” Horney locates parents, and particularly mothers, between culture and psyche. Cultural conditions, she asserted, determine neuroses—which in turn originate in the infant's wish for safety and for satisfaction: favorable conditions allow for the development of inner security and freedom. Fear and hostility suffered at the hand of devaluing and uncaring parents cause their daughters (narcissistic and masochistic) neurotic conflicts. Horney emphasizes how in Western culture females were pushed into dependency and submissiveness—which then encourage compliant affection and repressed hostility. Thereby, the sexualization of girls (rather than incest alone) creates an “emotional hothouse” that tends to culminate in the “feminine type”—afraid of sexual exploitation by “compulsive masculinity.” Sexual seductiveness becomes a strategy for finding safety, but it is accompanied by feelings of devaluation and degradation which, in turn, reaffirm that women are nothing but sex objects. Ultimately, Westkott advocates Horney's credo of self-responsibility in overcoming compulsive femininity, female altruism, and dependency, and she champions the heroine who believes that she herself is “worthy of care and that the world is her domain.” These goals, I might add, also “desexualize” Horney's brand of psychoanalysis and coincide with the goals of the Freudians she refutes: they too believe that feelings have to be worked through emotionally in order to arrive at true self-knowledge.

Grosskurth's *Melanie Klein* is a psychoanalytic biography, based on Klein's papers, works, previous biographies, and interviews with family members and coworkers. Klein's doctrines involved all sorts

of intellectual animosities, but she also had personal enemies because she was haughty, secretive and domineering. She almost invited scurrilous gossip. Grosskurth, who is prone to psychoanalyzing Klein, locates her behavior and depressions, likes and dislikes, and her theories, in her earliest experiences and particularly in those involving her overbearing and manipulative mother. Emphasizing the close relationship to her younger and emotionally dependent brother (he died at the age of twenty-five) and the rivalry with her older sister, Grosskurth keeps invoking these experiences. I do not want to discount their importance, but the theme becomes somewhat repetitive—more suited to a psychoanalysis than a biography—for no triviality seems too trivial to omit. Yet, Grosskurth also supplies fascinating details of psychoanalytic history. We learn that Karl Abraham was more independent of Freud than Jones led us to believe; that he was in touch with Wilhelm Fliess; that Jones started out backing Klein's tenets, liked her as a woman, but became increasingly ambivalent when she "replaced" him as a leading figure in *his* society. Ultimately, after the Freuds came to London in 1938, he undermined Klein's position by mediating between her and Anna Freud during the so-called "controversial discussions"—the battle for supremacy. Yet Jones did manage to hold the British Psychoanalytical Society together by getting everyone to "cohabit" within the same institute.

Grosskurth characterizes the struggle between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein as a case of sibling rivalry. Anna Freud's seminal paper *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense* (1936) reinforced Freud's ego theory and stressed the conflict-free aspects of the ego: the latter were put to the service of the "therapeutic alliance." In other words, Anna Freud primarily focused on uncovering her patients' psychic reality, while Klein primarily wanted to reduce their anxiety. Anna Freud held that there could be no viable psychoanalytic transference so long as the child was dependent upon its parents, that is, until the superego is internalized enough to deal with actual parental authority, around the age of five. (Her ideas converged with those of American Freudians who represented sixty-five percent of the International Psychoanalytic Association after the Second World War.) Klein, however, found that the child's ego emerges from the earliest projections and introjections—which she linked to the experiences evolving around feeding, that is, the first oral experiences. Thus she analyzed children whom the classical Freudians deemed too young. (Only later was it clear that her first patient was her own son.) Ac-

cording to Grosskurth, "Anna Freud was an expositor of her father's ideas, but only of those ideas which could be scrutinized in clearly lit, well-ventilated places. Sin, cruelty, suffering she shunned. The witches of the night ride on broomsticks and converse with the powers of darkness in Klein's work, but a Viennese spinster creates a tidy, reasonable world vigorously sweeping away the cobwebs."

Klein considered herself Freud's spiritual daughter, "a Freudian, but not an Anna Freudian." Unlike the ego psychologists who more or less ignored Freud's notions of love and death instincts, Klein explored them and held that the loss of love object and mourning reactivate the most threatening anxieties of earliest infancy. From her observations she inferred that children "introject" good and bad objects, and that depressive and paranoid states result from the internalization of bad ones. She concluded not only that children need "good-enough mothering," but that psychosis as well as neurosis might be amenable to psychoanalytic treatment. And she held that envy, jealousy, and greed evolve from the earliest conditions of nurturing. Klein's child therapy, therefore, was aimed at integrating split-off envy; at getting even three-year old patients to talk about their sexual and aggressive thoughts.

Klein's insights into "object relations" increasingly influenced British psychoanalysis, not least because by insisting on remaining within the British Psychoanalytical Society she had access to candidates. There, she had to "live with" (though rarely talk to) Anna Freud. Their students, however, who were exposed to the doctrines of both women, benefited from the intellectual stimulation. In recent years, most explicitly through the work of Otto Kernberg, Kleinian psychoanalysis has been infiltrating American classical psychoanalysis as well.

During her entire life Melanie Klein was embattled. After a difficult childhood and an unhappy marriage, she left her husband at a time when divorce was rare; she was an extraordinary person but always regretted that she had not attended medical school; her daughter Melitta Schmiedeberg who became a (medical) member of the British Psychoanalytical Society took public positions against her and "demonstrated" the mother-daughter rivalries of Klein's theories to excess. And some of Klein's followers, such as Paula Heimann, Winnicott, and Joan Riviere left her—or were discarded—when developing their own theoretical viewpoints.

Unlike Horney, who left the classical fold and thus remained outside the prestigious International Psychoanalytic Association,

Klein never lost its support. Undoubtedly, this forum helped dissemination of her ideas and techniques, particularly in Latin America, Spain and Mexico, where psychoanalysis is Kleinian (and Lacanian). Horney's influence was more immediate. Like Klein, she emphasized the necessity of parental warmth and nurturing as the basis of the mature self. But because her formulations coincided with what has become folk wisdom, her direct impact was rather short-lived. That is why Westkott has "resurrected" her legacy. Grosskurth, on the other hand, has written the biography of a brilliant woman whose legacy is just beginning to be recognized in America.

EDITH KURZWEIL

READING IN THE DARK

JOYCE'S BOOK OF THE DARK: FINNEGANS WAKE. By John Bishop. The University of Wisconsin Press. \$25.00.

In March 1923 Joyce started writing a book called *Work in Progress*. Knowing that the ground for its reception needed to be prepared, he sent ahead of him some twelve apostles, who published in May 1929 a book of essays in elucidation, *Our Exagmination round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. Joyce let it be known that his book was "a reconstruction of the nocturnal life," an imitation of "the dream-state": it was night-work, a dream-play, corresponding in that respect to the day-labor of *Ulysses*. In 1936 he told an interviewer that "there are, so to say, no individual people in the book—it is as in a dream, the style gliding and unreal as is the way in dreams. If one were to speak of a person in the book, it would have to be of an old man, but even his relationship to reality is doubtful." When the final version was published in 1939 as *Finnegans Wake*, its first readers at least knew what the book was supposed to be doing. Undismayed and on the whole appreciative reviews of it appeared from Edmund Wilson, William Troy, John Crowe Ransom, Harry Levin, John Peale Bishop, and other critics.

But it was still not clear how the book should be read. Many readers wanted to piece together the fragments of a story, and to regard the jabberwocky on the page as not entirely confounding a fairly simple tale of family life in Chapelizod, on the Phoenix Park

side of Dublin. When Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson published their *Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* in 1944, such readers were appeased. The story, as outlined by Edmund Wilson in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), was now more fully available.

Most of the scholarly work on *Finnegans Wake* since 1944 has been concerned with disentangling the linguistic constituents which together make the language of the book what it is: allusions, traces of Dutch, Sanskrit, Irish, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Hungarian, Italian, Breton, Swedish, and many other languages. Much of this scholarship is the work of Adaline Glasheen, J. S. Atherton, Matthew Hodgart, Clive Hart, L. O. Mink, Fritz Senn, Roland McHugh, and Danis Rose. McHugh's *Annotations to Finnegans Wake* (1980) assembles a lot of it.

John Bishop argues, in *Joyce's Book of the Dark*, that readers of *Finnegans Wake* have been unwilling to take Joyce at his word: the book should indeed be read as a dream-book, and we should give up the desire to turn it into a consecutive story about H. C. Earwicker and his family. There is a story, but it belongs to the day, and is merely ostensible. By night, old man Earwicker dissolves into a mother and child, and even then there is no demarcation by which he is prevented from being a Viconian giant. We misread *Finnegans Wake* if we insist on retaining a story, several characters, a beginning and an end. Or if we complain, as Wilson did, that no scene or act in the book is really clear, fully disclosed.

Bishop's procedure is to involve two worlds: the first is daytime, a state of adult wakefulness, governed by the mind's judgements, an unquestioning sense of self, and the eye's discrimination of surfaces; the second is night-time, the eyes are closed, the ears are open, the hero has lost his name and is now a figure "void of identity," best called Here Comes Everybody, "who lives 'refleshed' in the universally experienced condition of sleep, thinking in the form of poetic wisdom that flows out of the body and underlies the texts of dreams, whose mind is an introjected image of the universe and of the universe of people who made him." The several chapters of Bishop's book study *Finnegans Wake* as a work antithetical to the day-existence we think we know. Instead of characters and identities, we meet giants, landscapes, ancestral memories, gods and fighting men, anybody-and-everybody. Instead of "worried little subject-object relations," we are carried away "beyond bournes and bowers." No visible entities, but millions of strange shadows. Novo Nilbud, not

Dublin. The first world is predicated on a politics of mastery, order, and “day’s reasons”; the second is a place of anarchy and playfulness, a great “thisorder.”

The logic of Bishop’s argument, which seems to follow as night the day, is that it doesn’t matter where a reader enters *Finnegans Wake* or leaves it. If the story is only a nuisance, the reader is urged to get along without it. Who was it who said that a film should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order? Bishop wants us to read *Finnegans Wake* as an astrologer reads tea leaves:

I have only been practicing on *Finnegans Wake* a kind of textually self-endorsed “*Sortes Virgilianae*” (281), where the phrase refers to a traditionally long-standing if odd kind of reading procedure called “*Sortes Virgilianae*” (Latin: “Virgilian fortune-telling”). A Western version of the I Ching, Virgilian sortilege licenses the eager reader who seeks light in personal affairs to open his Virgil “at random” and —“volve the virgil page” (270) —begin interpreting whatever line he hits upon “ad lib” (302).*

I don’t know how seriously Bishop proposes sortilege or divination as the first analogy for reading *Finnegans Wake*. In a free country I don’t see any case for banning the procedure, but it incurs a difficulty. Sortilege is based on the conviction that there is indeed an ascertainable meaning, but that you have to be an initiate to grasp it; it is occult in any case and quite beyond the reach of an amateur. Nobody practices sortilege by nature, you have to be learned in its ways and probably inspired as well. But the only procedure Bishop recommends is association, and there are no grounds for thinking that an ascertainable meaning, a fortune inscribed in the stars or other signs, is accessible by that too-easy route. Or rather: it’s all right if you’re James Merrill and you find that by giving your days and some of your nights to it you can write long poems. Besides, no one has ever claimed that Joyce discovered anything about dreaming that Freud or Havelock Ellis hadn’t already divined.

I can see why Bishop, reacting against a strong acculturated desire, wants to prise readers away from a clear narrative. I would prefer to let the two worlds “tell each off the other,” without positing

*The page references are to *Finnegans Wake*.

any privilege in advance. Many sections of the book seem to me so evidently about fathers, mothers, sisters, older-brother-and-younger-brother that I would be reluctant to see these families dislodged or “dissolved.” In other parts of the book I’m willing to play the game of fairly-free association, with Bishop to brother me. The trouble about turning *Finnegans Wake* into a riddle—which is another of Bishop’s analogies—is that a reader indifferent to riddles may freely elect not to play.

If a reader agrees to play *Finnegans Wake* according to Bishop’s easy law of association, he is promised a particular boon:

In its richly particularized “nat language,” *Finnegans Wake* shows that the human experience of “one perceived nought” can be articulated with as much richness and zest, pathos and humor, as the plenitude of wakeful life. In ways to be made clear in passing, it finds this “nought” everywhere and always underlying and circumscribing the living of life in the Daily World. “We see nothingness,” in a way distinct to Joyce, “making the world iridescent, casting a shimmer over things.”

That last quotation is from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, and it seems an indelicacy. Bishop concedes, in a footnote, that “there are of course differences, though finally not irreconcilable ones, between Sartrean nothingness and the *Wake*’s “Real Absence.” I would hope they are irreconcilable: the one glow I don’t want to find in *Finnegans Wake* is Sartrean chic. I hope Bishop has something less glamorous in mind. William Troy’s review of *Finnegans Wake* referred to the state of panic which the mind experiences when “it feels itself passing beyond its own borders.” I can imagine a reading of *Finnegans Wake* in which that panic, the vertigo of shifting boundaries and lost bearings, would be sensed along with the pleasure of relaxing into indiscriminateness. Such a reading would keep the two worlds in some degree of relatedness, variable and mercurial indeed. But I don’t think Bishop’s book would let me persist in it: he wants to cut the night entirely adrift.

DENIS DONOGHUE

ART AGAINST ART'S SAKE

THE MESSIAH OF STOCKHOLM. By Cynthia Ozick. Alfred A. Knopf.
\$15.95

Cynthia Ozick's new novella is loaded with ironies, big and little. Lars Andemening, the 42-year-old protagonist of *The Messiah of Stockholm*, writes a book column for a Swedish newspaper, the *Morgontorn*. When writing up Lars's story, Ozick couldn't have known that she'd soon be similarly employed: last January she became a regular monthly contributor to *The New York Times Book Review*. In her first "About Books" column Ozick expressed her unease with the kind of "postmodernist inconstancy" on display in such novels as Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, whose characters "keep revising their speeches and their fates." Yet *The Messiah of Stockholm*, like much of Ozick's fiction, plays fast and loose with narrative rules and seems positively postmodernist in its determination to keep the reader off-balance.¹ And to whom is *The Messiah of Stockholm* dedicated? Philip Roth.

This gets us to the largest irony, the profoundest paradox, in Ozick's enterprise—in the literary journalism collected in *Art and Ardor* (1983) as in her fiction. If there's one thing she insists upon, it's that idolatry is evil and idols need to be smashed. Again and again she returns to the second of the Ten Commandments, the one prohibiting the worship of false gods and graven images. Ozick widens the prohibition until it encompasses art itself—or, at any rate, art for art's sake. As she sees it, the "Attic jug" that announced to Keats that "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty," is itself an idol, speaking falsehood. Nor are novelists to be trusted. Novelists are deceivers, not good citizens, she writes in a recent *Times* column. At times she sounds perilously close to the civic-minded philosopher who banished the poets from his ideal republic on the grounds that poets specialize in irrational enchantment. So where exactly does this put

1. I have my doubts about "postmodernism" as a critical term and use it only because of its currency. The term is more than a little ambiguous, and its use sometimes implies a measure of disapprobation. There is no such intent in this review.

Ozick's own fiction, particularly a work like *The Messiah of Stockholm*, whose texture is that of a fable and whose plot appeals to our appetite for irrational enchantment?

In short, Ozick the moralist has put Ozick the artist in the self-contradictory position of a knights-or-knaves game of logic: she is the truth-teller who says, "Don't believe me, I'm a liar." A skeptic might say that Ozick's fiction follows a recipe for eating your cake and having it, too. Putting your art at the service of an admonition against art leaves you in a cruel metaphysical dilemma: by what dispensation are your works spared from the indictment? The paradox is complete when we observe that the only legitimate defense of Ozick's position is one that her own critical principles would require her to reject. It could be argued that Ozick's fiction needn't conform to her critical propositions; that if it exposes the limitations of those propositions, so much the better; that it isn't the responsibility of the fiction writer to resolve the logical conundrums that preoccupy her, intractable as they are. Enough it is to explore them in fiction of such flesh-and-blood immediacy that the writer's more-or-less private obsession turns into a metaphor in which we are all in some ways implicated. In sum, *The Messiah of Stockholm* doesn't solve the problem that energizes it, but permissive readers aren't likely to complain. Moral ambiguities are more to our liking than moral absolutes, after all—especially when the author fulfills, as Ozick does, the writer's real categorical imperative: to enchant us, whether with truths or half-truths or supreme fictions.

The Messiah of Stockholm lends itself well enough to paraphrase, though a casualty of the exercise is the surface delight of Ozick's prose. We find ourselves in the literary "stewpot" of Stockholm—a setting that has the advantage of seeming at once remote from our Manhattan cauldron yet upon inspection curiously like it. That the Nobel Prize in Literature is conferred in Stockholm gives us a hint of the stakes involved in the parable Ozick spins out. Lars Andemening, an obscure and rather seedy specimen of the literary life, may seem an anachronistic vestige of an age of idealism; his bohemianism takes the form of an ascetic ideal. Lars uncompromisingly devotes his weekly book column to Eastern European writers rather than to books of topical interest. He is content with his lack of public consequence, for he is convinced his destiny is worth waiting for. It's his belief—or is it fantasy?—that his father was Bruno Schulz, the martyred author of *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanitarium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*.

So credibly does Ozick create an atmosphere of deception that the individual who previewed *The Messiah of Stockholm* for *Publishers Weekly* decided that Schulz must be her invention. Let it be said at once, therefore, that Schulz did in fact live and die; a Polish Jew, he was murdered by the Nazis on the street in his Galician village in 1942. Schulz had worked on a long-thought-lost last manuscript, a novel titled *The Messiah*; that, too, is fact. Lars is sure *The Messiah* will turn up, sure he is meant to bring it forth. He gathers an ally in the proprietress of a rare book shop, devotes hours to the study of Polish, and waits. It's a Jamesian situation, a conjunction of "The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Aspern Papers," and Ozick follows it ultimately to a Jamesian conclusion. In the end, illusions are smashed, but not without a fight and not without an acute pang of anguish and more than a few lingering doubts.

But having established a setting plausible enough to serve a satirical novel of manners, Ozick gives the plot a magical turn of the screw. A manuscript appears, brought by a young woman who claims to be Schulz's daughter, Adela. The tale of the manuscript's survival has the strangeness of folklore about it. And Schulz's *Messiah* itself is the more wondrous for appearing to be an extrapolation from Schulz's own published writing that yet closely resembles the quintessential Ozick dreamscape: a deserted village full of idol shops, rather like the one in which the patriarch Abraham's father toiled. According to one commentary upon *Genesis*, Abraham smashed the idols one day in his father's absence, then claimed the idols did it themselves; his father is incredulous at this explanation, and that clinches Abraham's case. If they are incapable of doing such a thing, why worship them? The idols in Schulz's alleged *Messiah*, however, are unattended by Abraham or, indeed, by any other human agent. Taking matters into their own hands, lacking human sacrifices, they demolish each other until the Messiah descends, releasing a bird with a bit of straw in its beak. One touch of the straw and each of the idols in turn dissolves.

To divulge too many more particulars of Ozick's plot would be unpardonable. Suffice it to say that a hoax manuscript turns into something quite different, and rather more chastening, when it is burned; that the loss of an illusion can mean, as it does for Lars, that the promise of brilliance will mature into mediocrity; and that the book's last words—"he grieved"—reverberate in the reader's mind with the same power as, say, the word "expired" has at the end of Bernard Malamud's "The Silver Crown," a story Ozick is known to

admire. (She refashioned its elements quite cunningly in “Usurpation,” probably the best story in her 1976 collection *Bloodshed*.)

Even so brief a plot summary will suggest how central a tale *The Messiah of Stockholm* is for Ozick. As a psychological drama, it works by Jamesian indirection and nuance to raise a troubling question: when is Lars better off, when he is deluded and obsessed or when, having overcome his delusions, he overcomes, too, his high calling, stops writing about obscure Eastern European writers, and starts to enjoy a journalist’s popular success? But if the novella confirms Ozick’s sense of herself as a disciple of Henry James, it is also a rather complicated act of fealty to Bruno Schulz: it usurps Schulz’s writings by way of extending their posthumous life. Moreover, it offers us an astonishingly apt metaphor for the false messiah: a book that can tell the truth despite the spurious nature of its provenance. It chastises us for the ease with which we can succumb to chicanery, and at the same time it reminds us of our spiritual poverty, which makes us yearn to find fit objects for our veneration. And we are right to pause over the book’s dedication to Philip Roth. It was meant, Ozick told me, to signify her gratitude to Roth, the general editor of Penguin’s “Writers from the Other Europe” series, to whose sponsorship of Bruno Schulz we owe our awareness of that estimable author. But for all her qualms about postmodernism, Ozick (who confesses she “admired like mad” Roth’s *The Counterlife*) has an affinity with Roth that goes beyond their shared interest in Eastern European writers. Call it a Judaic imperative: an obsessive need to explore the place where the moral and aesthetic impulses act upon each other, sometimes in concert, more often in opposition.

What is most impressive about *The Counterlife*, what lifts it above even *The Ghost Writer* as a literary achievement, is that it harnesses the full array of postmodernist devices—the false-bottomed narrative, the multiplication of counterfeit actualities and alternative possibilities, “what-could-be having always to top what-is”—not as ingenious ends in themselves and not merely to serve an inquiry into the puzzling relations between fiction and reality. No, Roth interrupts his narrative and brings his characters back from the dead, letting them revise their speeches and their fates, for a purpose that must be characterized as moral. The middle-aged dentist dies during heart surgery, or the same dentist recovers, abandons his New Jersey practice and family, and emigrates to Israel, where he joins the Gush Emunim settlement of a charismatic zealot—either scenario is valid not only as a metaphysical possibility but as a moral

predicament. The dentist's initial dilemma, for instance, brilliantly dramatizes the moral implications of Freud's argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In the man's decision to undergo a life-endangering heart operation rather than continue to live without his sexual potency, we see—to put it in its most reductive terms—the fatal alliance of Eros and Thanatos, and we see it as inevitable, irresistible, the self's anarchic refusal to subordinate its instinctual desires to the mandates of civilization.

Ozick, too, stands her characters in the path between opposing mirrors in *The Messiah of Stockholm*. Here, too, the reliability of the narrative is in constant doubt. Each of the major characters is, it gradually unfolds, an impostor, though we're never meant to be entirely clear as to where the real identity of Lars Andemening ends and his fantasy self takes over. There is something pitiable as well as grotesque about such a character—and the superb aesthetic effects that Ozick achieves with her false *Messiah* do not cheapen his predicament but charge it with intensity. The fixation on Bruno Schulz, the willingness to be hoaxed, then the astonished and astonishing rejection of the hoax: the withdrawal from the dream at the very moment when it appears to be coming true: what else is this but a parable of the imaginative life, its lure, its limits, and its costs? Like Roth, Ozick strives to explore, in all its complexity, the interplay between writing as a species of artistic invention and writing as a way of keeping a sacred covenant. These rival conceptions of the writer's vocation coexist at best in an uneasy detente. But constant conflict can yield to periodic acts of reconciliation, as when, in a single publishing season, books of the imaginative strength of *The Counterlife* and *The Messiah of Stockholm* arrive.

DAVID LEHMAN

FACT AND FICTION

A DARK SCIENCE: WOMEN, SEXUALITY, AND PSYCHIATRY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. By Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. \$16.00.

Jeffrey Masson is a man with a mission. The story of Masson's controversial dismissal in 1981 as Projects Director of the

Sigmund Freud Archives, masterfully related in Janet Malcolm's *New Yorker* articles, is well known. He was effectively expelled from the psychoanalytic community for the outspoken advancement of his heterodox views on the Freudian theory of seduction. Since then, Masson has been preoccupied with providing what he perceives to be the historical and theoretical vindication of those ideas. In *The Assault on Truth* (1984), he attacked Freud for his famous abandonment of the seduction hypothesis in 1897. Exploring the origins of adult psychoneuroses, Freud had come to believe that the actual experiences of childhood molestations were in many cases far less critical than the internal, "fantasized" perceptions of such events. In Masson's mind, this shift in emphasis was not only a scientific error of major proportions but a conscious and cowardly attempt to camouflage the widespread occurrence of early traumatic experiences. To protect adults (that is, adult men), Masson insisted, a rampant sexual evil was literally being psychologized out of existence. The reception of Masson's work, apart from a few notices in the radical feminist press, was resoundingly negative; but, by all indications, he has learned little from that consensus of criticism. In his new book, *A Dark Science: Women, Sexuality, and Psychiatry in the Nineteenth Century*, Freud-bashing has given way to a general assault on the European medical community in the last century. Sex, crime, and conspiracy are again at center stage, and, once again, a majority of readers will come away with deep reservations about the intellectual and scholarly credibility of the author.

A full historical study of the medical treatment of women and children in the Victorian era would be welcome. Masson, however, has pursued a different path. With the help of a research assistant, he has combed through the tables of contents of the major pediatric, psychiatric, and gynecological journals of France and Germany for the period 1860–1900. He estimates that he has examined over 750 volumes of writing. From this comprehensive review, he has chosen a series of articles—nine in all—and has translated them for us. *A Dark Science* is the result: a small compilation of case histories, concerned primarily with child abuse and gynecological surgery, which Masson presents as a kind of clinical anthology of writings in the field. For his part, Masson has provided a thirty-page introduction to the collection. There are no medical or historical annotations to the texts.

In the absence of the scholarly paraphernalia that usually guides the reader through a collection of original documents, Mas-

son's introductory remarks take on added importance. But a glance at these opening pages makes it abundantly clear that ideological proclamation has prevailed over historical analysis. For Masson, it is no exaggeration to say that psychiatric science is one long exercise in organized medical misogyny. Concerned on the surface only with scientific advancement and therapeutic beneficence, the male-dominated mental sciences of Europe and America have in truth, he argues, been driven by a desire to control the minds and bodies of women and children. With a vengeance, Masson aims to reveal this secret sexual oppression. "These readings," he explains at the outset, "illustrate how men in positions of power over women's lives, especially their sexual lives, misused that power to warp, damage, inhibit, and even destroy the women's sexual (and sometimes emotional and physical) selves." Furthermore, Masson believes that the sexist, pseudoscientific ideas and attitudes of nineteenth-century doctors were codified a generation later in Freud's "phallogocentric" work. Through Freud, they have been handed down to contemporary psychologists, social workers, and sex therapists. The book's bibliography brims with recent writings on rape and incest, described by the author as "brilliant" and "pathbreaking." A short preface to the book has been supplied by Katharine A. MacKinnon, author of the well-known work on the sexual harassment of working women. At times, MacKinnon's prosecuting fury is extraordinary. She characterizes nineteenth-century psychiatric practices as "sexual atrocities" and sees the medical world of the time as "a chamber of horrors for women," "a nightmare." In the opening paragraph of the book, she likens the ill-treatment of women by doctors in the past to the prosecution of heretics during the Inquisition and the murder of the Jews during the Holocaust.

With this sort of rhetorical overkill, we can approach Masson's cases only with great trepidation. What medical monstrosities, what Victorian Auschwitz, lies ahead for us? I am happy to report that readers can breathe a sigh of collective relief. Masson's cases range from the irrelevant to the inconclusive and, in the end, are difficult to take seriously at all. Not the least curious thing about several of the stories assembled here is that they contain information directly contradictory to Masson's ideas. In 1880, for instance, Dr. Alfred Fournier delivered a lecture to the Académie de Médecine. Fournier, a court-appointed medical examiner in Paris, addresses the question of the clinical evidence of rape and its legal implications. He points out that one common physical symptom of rape, acute

vulvar inflammation, should not automatically be accepted as a sign of molestation. Cautioning against hasty conclusions, Fournier indicates a number of other medical causes of the symptom. He presents the case of a young female patient with acute vaginitis in which the injury was inflicted not in a neighbor's attack, as the patient originally charged, but through a parental beating. Because the accused in the case was a man and the parent concerned was the child's mother, and because the doctor was a male and the patient was not, Masson charges a cover-up. But Fournier's argument is medically sound, and, what's more, he plainly acknowledges the widespread occurrence of such assaults on children. "Cases of rape and sexual abuse," he writes, "(are) hardly rare in certain hospitals," and he advises full criminal prosecution for these heinous crimes. Far from providing the devastating indictments he imagines, many of Masson's cases prove nothing at all.

But let us for a moment grant Masson the benefit of the doubt and proceed to the most damaging cases in the collection. In 1882, Dr. Demetrius Zambaco published a case in the French periodical *L'Encéphale* concerning masturbation in two young girls. Zambaco relates at length the histories of "X" and "Y," two sisters ages six and ten who, in public and private, masturbated twelve to fifteen times a day. Despite bleeding and internal injury, the children used every imaginable object—pencils, paintbrushes, pieces of wood, even scissors, hairpins, and dinner forks—to stimulate themselves. There was a strong element of rebellion in their behavior, and the more harshly "X" and "Y" were reprimanded by their parents and doctors, the more furiously they went at themselves. Confronted by this compulsive behavior, Zambaco responded with a series of escalating physical restraints. Verbal proscriptions gave way to cold showers and chastity belts, then to whippings and straitjackets. Eventually, "X" and "Y" were subjected to such "treatments" as electric applications to the genitalia and multiple cauterizations of the clitoris. Zambaco appears to have had almost no sense of the deep emotional pathology of the case. His approach was purely punitive, and he describes these tortures with a chilling nonchalance. ("I burned her three times on both labia majora, and once on the clitoris, and to punish her for her disobedience I cauterized her buttocks and loins with the dreaded large iron.") Nor, Masson shows, was Zambaco alone in his use of such draconian pseudo-therapies, Dr. Alfred Hegar of Berlin argued in print for recourse to the ovariectomy as a routine treatment for recurrent stomach discomfort. And, in the

mid-1860s, a Dr. Gustav Braun published in the *Wiener medizinische Wochenschrift* the account of a woman with a number of persistent “hysterical” symptoms whose clitoris was surgically removed while an all-male audience of students looked on. We are allowed to hear the sobs and screams, to see the arching pelvic thrusts of the patient during the operation.

Let there be no doubt about it: the activities of Braun and Hegar represented grievous medical errors with serious emotional and physical consequences for their patients, and Zambaco’s is a case, pure and simple, of licensed sexual sadism. But, apart from their shock value, what, we will want to ask, is the historical meaning of these clinical melodramas? In particular, how representative were these phenomena of general 19th-century medicine? And were these practices specifically cross-sexual in nature—that is, were they intended, consciously or otherwise, as power plays on the part of male physicians toward female patients? On both of these issues, there are big problems for Masson.

The two young patients of Zambaco got into trouble because they played with themselves too much. But anyone who knows anything about the history of sexuality knows that the Victorian anti-masturbation campaign was directed with much greater frequency and ferocity against men than women. The cautionary literature on the supposed perils of self-pollution was enormous. As a number of historians have shown in detail, a formidable armamentarium of devices—penile rings, urethral belts, pubic bandages, and straitjackets among them—was deployed against the solitary vice. Frequent treatments for nocturnal emissions and “spermatorrhea” included freezing showers, isolation in the nude, and the forced administration of potassium bromide. Several medical writers at the time suggested male castration as a cure for satyriasis and insanity. The nineteenth-century struggle against masturbation may have been extreme and irrational, but it most emphatically was not designed for the exclusive oppression of women.

That many of the sadistic procedures found in these pages were applied to men as well as to women scarcely renders them more acceptable, but it should compel us to look beyond reflexive ideological explanations to a fuller understanding of the subject at hand. Many of these excesses were less the result of sexual bias than of bad science. Behind many of the measures employed against hysterical patients, for example, rested the ancient but still influential urogenital model of the disorder which traced an array of nervous symp-

toms to the female reproductive system. The unwillingness of most physicians at the time to consider subtle, psychotherapeutic techniques in handling patients such as “X” and “Y” was an expression of an age of rigid medical materialism in which nonorganic therapies were viewed as unscientific. And the increase in the amount of gynecological surgery during the final third of the nineteenth century was intimately connected to the contemporary emphasis on localizable pathologies and to the dramatic development of Listerian antisepsis in the late 1860s, which vastly reduced the number of fatal postoperative infections. Masson’s cases evince medical ignorance, misjudgment, and even malpractice, but there is precious little evidence of a concerted sexual conspiracy.

Perhaps the most serious of Masson’s accusations concerns the idea that the case histories in this collection represent the mainstream of late 19th-century medicine. Masson characterizes the abusive treatment of women and children as “the essence of nineteenth-century psychiatric beliefs.” And on the important question of female castration, he contrives to leave the impression that the exploits of Drs. Hegar and Zambaco were accepted and even practiced by the entire profession. “Few of these articles called forth any dissent from the medical profession,” he writes. “I would have included more such dissent in this anthology had I been able to find it.”

Now, at best, these statements are highly disingenuous. It is true that during the 1870s and 1880s there occurred a great increase in the amount of pelvic surgery in cases involving no overt pathology. In particular, the unilateral and bilateral ovariectomy—or Battey’s operation, as it was called in this country—had its outspoken advocates on both sides of the Atlantic. But, as even a cursory review of the sources will reveal, medical professionals in the nineteenth century in fact adopted a very wide range of positions on the question of amputative gynecological surgery. In the medical journals, gynecological textbooks, and public press of the day, many doctors openly counselled against these mutilating measures. Jean-Martin Charcot, arguably the best known neuropathologist of his age, repeatedly polemicized against the barbaric “de-sexing” of female patients. A majority of physicians took a moderate stance on the issue and were willing to consider such radical procedures only in cases of the most severe and prolonged mental and physical suffering on the part of the individual. One of the writers in Masson’s own collection, Dr. Paul Flechsig, states that he has chosen to publish an article on castration “because many psychiatrists reject the gynecological”

cological treatment of neurosis.” In his concluding remarks, Flechsig obligingly summarizes the current medical literature for and against the practice. Clearly, a considerable number of respected nineteenth-century physicians advocated the almost ritual removal of female reproductive parts as a remedy for random nervous complaints. But the important historical point is that no professional consensus existed. The question of the desirability of these procedures—not unlike latter-day controversies regarding mastectomies, circumcision or coronary by-pass surgery—was a heated medical debate, with the conservative position winning out by the end of the century.

With all of these qualifications, how does the medical enterprise of our Victorian predecessors come out in the end? To be sure, there is a kernel of truth in Masson’s preoccupations. By contemporary standards, Victorian medical discourse is often maddeningly moralizing. Nineteenth-century psychological theories contained a number of elements that were seriously slanted against women. And pedophilia has doubtless been more prevalent in the past than we have acknowledged. But the professional historian as well as the serious amateur reader are surely interested in a balanced view of the subject. For his own purposes, Masson has chosen to dwell on several of the darker chapters in the history of the nineteenth-century medical sciences; but, quite obviously, an easy recital of horror stories is inadequate. We can no more generalize from Masson’s cases to the entire profession than we would extrapolate from, say, current malpractice suits to all of twentieth-century medicine. As a number of more responsible historians of science have also shown, nineteenth-century medicine was at times prejudiced in its treatment of women—and, incidentally, of blacks, immigrants, homosexuals, the mentally deficient, and other categories of people. Yet it was this very profession, at the same point in history, that mapped the brain, conquered cholera, developed surgical anesthetics, pioneered bacteriology and cellular pathology, established the modern research laboratory, organized professional education for doctors and nurses, and lengthened life expectancy by nearly a decade. As the eminent medical historian Richard Shryock once observed, it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that modern medicine became modern. We are all—men, women, and children—the incalculable beneficiaries of this development.

If *A Dark Science* will be of limited value for physicians and historians of medicine, how, we might finally inquire, will it be

received by women's historians? In my view, they won't much like the book either. As Mary Beth Norton recently pointed out in *The New York Times Book Review* ("Is Clio a Feminist? The New History," April 13, 1986), the field of women's studies has undergone an impressive evolution in the past twenty years. The first writings in the field from the late sixties and early seventies were based chiefly on a kind of victimization model. These works focused almost exclusively on the social, legal, moral, and medical means through which women have been subjugated by men. But, due to its obvious intellectual limitations, this form of writing has by and large disappeared from the scholarly literature, giving way to a more sophisticated kind of commentary on the historical experience of women. As Norton showed, such work has taken as its subject the many remarkable and diversified ways in which women have actively modelled their lives and their worlds, even within male-dominated cultures and politics. Moreover, in recent years, "gender studies," devoted to the critical examination of the categories of femininity and masculinity, has emerged as a fertile area of investigation. In this new context, Masson's vision of an unqualified confrontation between villainous doctors and female victims represents a reversion to an old and unconstructive form of thinking.

There will, of course, remain a small and specialized group of readers who will find Masson's message congenial. There are people for whom the male oppression model is not so much an historical hypothesis as a social and psychological world-view, who would agree with MacKinnon writing in her preface: "Women should study these medical articles . . . to find out what men *really* think of them." Readers of this persuasion will not be much bothered by the basic logical and evidential shortcomings of Masson's work. They will most likely be attracted, as they were with his last book, to the strident tone and sensationalistic content. Those of us with a good memory of Malcolm's articles may feel that Masson and members of the feminist fringe make for strange bedfellows. (Masson, after all, claimed several years ago to have slept with close to a thousand women in his lifetime). Both parties, it is clear, perceive a common enemy in the contemporary psychiatric establishment. But the similarity of interests is a delusion, and the followers of MacKinnon will soon realize that Masson's motives are wholly different from their own. The ideological marriage is surely destined to dissolve, but, in the meantime, it appears that Masson has succeeded in seducing the

radical feminist reader—and, here too, the seduction is real and not imaginary.

MARK S. MICALE

POETS' PROSE

OBLIGATI: ESSAYS IN CRITICISM. By Anthony Hecht. Atheneum. \$15.95.

RECITATIVE. By James Merrill. Edited and with an Introduction by J.D. McClatchy. North Point Press. \$25.00.

MINOR MONUMENTS: SELECTED ESSAYS. By Howard Moss. The Ecco Press. \$20.00

Reading a poet's prose arouses contradictory expectations. Will the prose be the wrong side of the poetry, presenting the same in-woven shapes in a seamily disheveled guise? Or will it express an altogether new side of the poet's mind and personality?

Anthony Hecht's *Obligati*, James Merrill's *Recitative*, and Howard Moss's *Minor Monuments* are all books about other books—largely, in the last case, works of fiction, while Merrill spends a good deal of time considering his own poetic oeuvre, and Hecht touches on poets from Shakespeare and Marvell to Richard Wilbur. The questions, however, persist: how do we go about fitting the prose into our sense of the poets' several worlds?

All three of these books contain treasures of learning and perception, acquired (or at least worn) with elegant insouciance. Merrill on Cavafy or Dante, Hecht on *The Merchant of Venice*, Moss on Chekhov or Tolstoy are amateurs in the root sense of the word, lovers of these texts, whose love, illuminated by their peculiar poetic gifts, in turn lights up the works under scrutiny for the lucky reader.

Only *Obligati* and *Recitative*, however, seem shaped by the kinds of internal symmetries we expect of books of poems, so that one piece in the volume speaks to another. Perhaps for the same reason, the Hecht and Merrill volumes shed light, however indirectly, on their authors' poetic methods and concerns. With Moss's essays, neither the internal eloquence nor the poetic reflection seems to be at work.

Glancing at each of the three prefaces affords an entertaining

glimpse at style and temperament—impossible to determine where one leaves off and the other begins:

There are after all things to be said for prose. I still read it, often with more profit than I do poetry. I go on using it for letters, conversation, the recording of dreams, and so forth. . . . Yet I persist in seeing it as a mildly nightmarish medium, to which *there is no end*: coterminous with one's very life, and only at rare and irregular intervals affording that least pause in flight whereby a given line of poetry creates the desire for another. . . .

(Merrill)

Hecht, like Merrill, uses his preface to ponder the differences between poetry and prose with regard to audience; but here the specific concern, indeed worry, is about the conventions the critic, unlike the poet, is allowed to use to protect himself:

A book of poems is sent forth nowadays with an unwritten envoy . . . as a silent prayer and invisible amulet against the dangers it must encounter; while a critic is allowed a preface in which to try to forestall and disarm the attacks he imagines may be levelled against him. . . . I envision the enemy approaching on both flanks. . . .

In contrast to these bravura metaphors, which forecast the tones of what will follow, Moss seems almost uninflected: neutral, sensible, mild, not insisting upon his poetic status:

Collections of essays and reviews are usually prefaced by an apology: despite the look of a miscellany, the taste and sensibility of the author unites them all.

Fair enough. What then are the figures in these carpets?

As Merrill's preface might serve to hint, he is the most charming performer and most self-deprecating host to the world of prose. His airy manner fails, like a flimsy garment, to conceal underlying structures which offer their own delights. Many of these structures are in some way double, mirroring symmetries: "scissoring and mending," a phrase from the poem "Yannian," describes a major preoccupation in Merrill's work with paradox and change,

doubleness and unity. "The unities of home and world, and world and page, will be observed," he writes in *Recitative*, "through the very transition from one to the other." Of Montale: "the two natures were always one. . . . any word can lead you from the kitchen-garden into really inhuman depths." Defending his method and subject matter: "Total, clear-eyed immersion in one's own little world produces (especially if one is Joyce, or Montaigne, or Tolstoy) an excellent likeness of the universe."

Unlike Merrill in temperament, Hecht resembles him in being a superb poet, master not only of a technique but a vision. And the clear-eyed immersion Merrill speaks of is perhaps not so different from what Hecht, in an essay not collected here, has called the "state of aesthetic contemplation" which art (which "serves to arrest action rather than promote it") exists in order to invite. The sense of arrested action is present not only in many of Hecht's best poems, but in his prose style, with its dignified pace and somber voice.

A sober leisureliness is the essence of Hecht's argument—and style. When writing without restrictions of space, as he tells us was the case with his *Merchant* essay, Hecht proceeds as slowly and thoughtfully as a chess player—or as God arranging the world? What is important is worth taking time over; thus we are even supplied, in the essay on Marvell and Keats, with texts of the two poems there discussed—a gracious and sensible practice we English teachers are encouraged to discourage. The context of Hecht's rapt attentiveness somehow imbues the already beautiful words of the poems with some of the special savor of the essayist's concentration.

If Merrill's genius for metaphor stands him in good stead in the "nightmarish" realm of prose, neither does Hecht's peculiar gift desert him when he turns to criticism. This gift isn't easy to describe. Too simply, it might be called a knack of giving words we might have thought worn out fresh weight and authority; too abstractly, a compelling vision of evil. (Historic horrors underlie the sinuous reading of *The Merchant of Venice*; I felt the force of anti-Semitism with brutal freshness.) This vision doesn't tempt Hecht to oversimplify; whether he is considering Shylock or Robert Lowell, he takes pains to understand the contradictions of (and between) language and behavior—always with an eye to the past (his cameo comparison of Lowell and Byron is a case in point) and to all of literature, as well as to the looming categories of good and evil, of

“more light! more light!” and fearful blackness, that structure his vision and correspond to Merrill’s thoroughgoing dualism.

What enables Merrill and Hecht to keep circling their beloved themes is that sense of creative leisure, of unhurried and unforced aesthetic contemplation, that the Roman poets called *otium*. Leisure translates into pleasure: write about only what you care about. And although the monuments Howard Moss has chosen to write about clearly mean pleasure for him, the sense of happy serendipitousness, of a match of temperaments between writer and subject that distinguishes *Obbligati* and *Recitative*, is absent from *Minor Monuments*.

Too much space in the collection is devoted to reviews of biographies—surely an approach too far removed from the text, though the genre can be transcended, as in Merrill’s essay on Cavafy, Hecht’s on Lowell, or indeed Moss’s on Whitman. But it’s where there is no prior agenda to evaluate or retell that Moss is at his wonderfully acute and sensitive best as a reader, as in the essays on “Three Sisters” and *Anna Karenina*.

Talking of temperaments, an underlying bleakness surfaces in the subtitles of some of these pieces: “A Pinched Existence,” “Going to Pieces,” “Good Poems, Sad Lives,” “No Safe Harbor.” Supremely sane and sensible, Moss is sometimes rather sad himself. I came to miss the exuberance of Merrill’s airy ironies or Hecht’s organ-toned invective: Moss is never nasty, but has a mildly irritating habit of taking away with one hand what he’s been giving (and will finish his essay by continuing to bestow) by the armful. He describes Cavafy’s accomplishment, then begins a new paragraph, “But that accomplishment seems to me peculiarly patchy,” only to return to praise. Auden is called “one of the five or six supremely intelligent people on earth.” Next paragraph: “But in spite of his brilliance, something always seemed to me to be missing.”

I’m doomed to repeat that observation: despite Moss’s flawless style, vast intelligence, and perspicacious readings, something seems to be missing from these pieces. Possibly—writing under unotiose conditions of assignment and deadline—Moss has been forced to adhere to an uninspiring “conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic.” This phrase is from the penultimate paragraph of one of the gems of poets’ prose in America, Robert Frost’s “The Figure a Poem Makes.” I imagine Moss, Merrill, and Hecht would be unanimous in their wish to give Frost the last word:

Scholars and artists thrown together are often annoyed at the

puzzle of where they differ. Both work from knowledge, but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields. No acquirement is on assignment, or even self-assignment. Knowledge of the second kind is much more available in the wild free ways of wit and art. A schoolboy may be defined as one who can tell you what he knows in the order in which he learned it. The artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic.

RACHEL HADAS

MORE ON DELMORE

PORTRAIT OF DELMORE: JOURNALS AND NOTES OF DELMORE SCHWARTZ: 1939-1959. Edited and Introduced by Elizabeth Pollett. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$35.00.

It is possible to feel overwhelmed by Delmore Schwartz in death as it was in life. Twenty years after his death on July 11, 1966, the movement to resurrect Schwartz has taken an aggressive turn. The publication of his journals is just a ripple in the tide of Schwartziana that has been swelling since 1975, when Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* brought Schwartz back into public consciousness as the kibbitzer maudit and insomniac laureate of his age. That wave includes Robert Phillips's edition of Schwartz's *Letters*, published in 1984; Schwartz's *Last and Lost Poems* (1979); the collection of "bagatelles," *The Ego is Always at the Wheel* (1986); James Atlas's *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet* (1977); the extended portrait of Schwartz in William Barrett's *The Truants* (1982); and Bruce Bawer's essay on Schwartz's poetry in *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell* (1986). Virtually forgotten after his death, Schwartz has now been brought back to life as a symbol of Jewish intellectual life and a small but vigorous cottage industry.

Much of this industry is the work of Schwartz's literary executor Robert Phillips, who has been toiling in the ruins of Schwartz's career in the hopes, it seems, of making a museum out of all that shattered masonry. The *Letters*, the *Last and Lost Poems* and *The Ego is Always at the Wheel* are his doing, and he cautions us in the last book that other publications are likely to be forthcoming: verse plays, unpublished novels, stories, a book-length critical study of T.S. Eliot, and the autobiographical poem that Schwartz wrestled with for years, *Genesis, Book II*. "Much of this material," Phillips has been candid to admit in the preface to *The Ego is Always at the Wheel*, "is not Schwartz at his best," and it is doubtful that any reader of the most recent gleanings will take issue with him.

Phillips has not been alone. Working in tandem to edit, decipher, and publish Schwartz's gargantuan journals has been Schwartz's exwife, Elizabeth Pollett, who had been estranged from Schwartz for nine years at the time of his death. The journals, some 2,400 pages of lava and ash, were among the papers rescued by Dwight Macdonald from a moving company, after their whereabouts came to light during a chance encounter in a bar between Macdonald's son and the proprietor of the company. Those 2,400 pages were eventually transcribed into 1,400 pages of typescript, then edited down to something like 900 pages. Entries after 1959, which Elizabeth Pollett found virtually indecipherable, are omitted.

Schwartz began the journal of his twenty-sixth birthday, December 8, 1939, and kept at it for twenty-seven years until his death. It began as a diary of the most conventional kind: "In the evening I went to the movie. . . . Yesterday we went to see the Fergussons. . . . Jay called from Mt. Vernon." Except that literature is Schwartz's constant preoccupation, this is fairly indistinguishable from the diary of an ordinary teenager. It is self-conscious, gossipy, and bristling with resentment. Keeping track of social encounters and the social injuries he invariably provoked was Schwartz's chief preoccupation. But by 1942, the journal had become a catch-all for whatever impressions were bubbling through his mind: poems, limericks, epigrams, puns, sendups, assaults, appeals, diatribes—the effluvia of his restless imagination. When Schwartz was in one of his manic moods, the journal took on the qualities of a Joycean *monologue interieur*, and Schwartz's lifelong fascination with Joyce, whom he transcribed into his notebooks as a discipline of style, may have inspired his erratic and spontaneous method of notation. But in Schwartz's hands the Joycean man-

ner—fleeting impressions joined by threads of association—often dispensed with the associations. Early on, the journal suggests a basic disorganization. By 1942, when Schwartz was twenty-nine and at the height of his powers, the private writing was already showing signs of decomposition, as though the tide of impressions was no longer under control. Two years later, while keeping up a brave front as a poet and man of letters, he privately admitted defeat:

This lifelong sickness which robs me of my self, which takes away my power, which made me a poor student, the author of unfinished works, or works which deceive me very much: at last I know it is a sickness, and that I am hardly to blame, to blame myself—at least that much is understood.

The sickness was never precisely pinpointed, though insomnia was Schwartz's chief torment, and the remedies he indulged to combat it had a shattering effect on every mental faculty: his concentration, his character, his work habits. The journal is a twenty-year-long pathogram, which shows us Schwartz sliding into a limbo of alcohol, amphetamines, and barbiturates until disorder has become his only order, scatter his only unity, everywhere his sole direction.

July 5 [1945] I took Benzedrine at 3:30. St. Louis 7, Giants 5. I rejected ten mss. I took a haircut. I had breakfast with E.; lunch with [Milton] Klonsky; I dined with *The New Yorker* at the Sevilla. I wrote one painful page. I glanced through Auden's collected poems and was distressed by the titles. "Don't be Careful." Spoke to Edna [Phillips] on the phone.

Page after hopeless page, the journal proceeds in this fractured and banal fashion, the self-regard punctuated by jokes and epiphanies and, on good days, poems on the theme of his torment:

I held a seashell to my ear and heard
My heart roar PANDEMONIUM which was to say
Every demon from hell yells in your heart
—Although you thought you heard the senseless sea,
You only heard yourself.

Schwartz's poetry was all misery and form, and the misery being constant, his perennial quest was for a proper form. "Form is an endless effort," he writes, "and not only that, but perhaps the secret

of life." Again, "Every success I knew was from the fecundative power of form." These are standard claims, and yet in the context of these journals they seem like pleas for redemption. Cut loose from any sustaining ideas, Schwartz took form alone for his grail, one that was at times no larger than a shotglass: "All literature," he would declare nonchalantly, "is an effort at the formal character of the epigram," and he hoarded his epigrams the way a comedian hoards punch lines.

Schwartz's performance, as he turned the inner pandemonium into a theater of personality, had a hypnotic effect on others. "Mankind is stunned by the Exuberance and Beauty of certain individuals," observed Bellow in *Humboldt's Gift*. "When a Manic Depressive escapes from his Furies he's irresistible." In *New York Jew*, Alfred Kazin would remember "the headlong rush of words that seemed to engage every muscle in his face as he twisted and spat in the rage of his opinions." But Schwartz's improvisations are not so compelling in print as they were face to face. The command was in the delivery, which wedded the manic-depressive's intoxication to the *tumbler's* sense of timing, without which the exuberant lines fade into narcissism and exaggeration; they seem merely gaudy without being particularly potent, and Pollett herself steps outside the glow of her own devotion long enough to express disappointment in "the lopsidedness of the entries and the impossibilities, finally, of language to render life." This book might be thought of as the script for a great tragicomic performance in which puns and one-liners take the place of heroic verse. Schwartz was a dynamo of quips, a machine for generating *bon mots* and a few *mauvais* ones as well. "What this country needs is a good five-cent psychiatrist"; "Philip Rahv has his good qualities, but he never lets them stand in his way"; "She was the wife of the party; he was engaged in holy wedlock"; "How do you like Kipling?" "I never drink it"; "A horse divided against itself cannot stand"; "All gall is divided into three parts: arrogance, insensitivity, self-dramatization." Schwartz aspired, it seems, to be Milton Berle, but such a Berle as himself might yarn to be T. S. Eliot, taking the measure of modern life in iambs and singing to the mermaids with a cigar in his teeth.

Schwartz was a study in contradictions. On the one side lay a heaviness, immanence, a nervous, exasperated life, and a sluggish physicality, "the heavy bear who goes with me."

When I go down to sleep
To sleep

I am wood I am
 Stone I am a slow
 River, hardly flowing
 & all is warm & all is animal
 —I am stone, I am river
 I am wood—a wood but not
 A leaf . . .

Then again, in raptures of illumination, he was the bard of air and wind, music and light.

Music is not water, but it moves like water
 It is not fire but it soars as warm as the sun
 It is not rock, it is not fountain,
 But rock and fountain, clock and mountain
 Abide within it, bound together
 In radiance pulsing, vibrating, and reverberating,
 Dominating the domination of the weather.

This cadenza appears in 1959, when, gloomy and dazed, Schwartz could still snatch a grace beyond the reach of amphetamines. Playing Ariel to his own Caliban, he could outflank his depression long enough to strike the silver note. It is remarkable. The journal, otherwise sodden and world weary, suddenly melts into air. Perhaps these were no more than the normal gyrations of the manic depressive, whose capricious moods can drag him from the suburbs of heaven to the porches of hell in minutes, but one is struck all the same by their extremity: how utterly black were the black moods and how dazzling the light ones.

I wish I could report that this volume was a joy to read or that it returned me to Schwartz's writing with renewed appreciation. Unfortunately, it is a trial that no one will pick up casually. The scatter is appalling, and if these journals in any way can be said to capture Schwartz's furious presence, it is only by documenting in brutal detail his confusion and grief and the venom that poisoned all his social relations. The brilliant range of reference that Bellow recorded in *Humoldt's Gift*—"Yeats, Apollinaire, Lenin, Freud, Morris R. Cohen, Gertrude Stein, baseball statistics, and Hollywood gossip"—was no more than that, a range of reference and evidence of a mind that had mistaken gossip for thought and had gotten lost in the cosmopolitan wilderness somewhere between James Joyce and Walter Winchell. Schwartz's mind was an encyclopedia from which everything had been scratched but the titles, and he had an inkling

of his own depthlessness: "As with an onion," he wrote, "illusion after illusion is peeled off—what remains? Nothing at all—".

What did Schwartz believe? These journals show us a man without a gospel, who by that fact alone stood apart from his fellow *Partisan Review* editors, all of whom were virtuosi of gospel. One looks in vain for a significant politics: Roosevelt appears seven times in the index, Trotsky four times, Stalin only twice, and they are only names among names. One looks for an emotional agenda, a social doctrine, a code of human relations, a burning metaphysic—anything. Even a poetic. The terrible truth was that behind the poetry was a void that Schwartz sought desperately to fill with words, as if to hide from himself the absence of meaning. Instead of meaning we find personality, instead of thought, declamation. Schwartz performed the rare feat of baring his breast while hiding his heart, electing to complain, to joke, to dramatize himself, and above all to itemize with dull perseverance every drink, every pill, every slight, every grievance, every frivolity, every frisson, and every pang, until the tabula rasa was smudged with grief and clotted with verse.

It is not too strong to say that this is an appalling book and that Schwartz is diminished by these raids on his papers. The journals are 663 pages long, the letters 384, the "bagatelles" 143. By comparison, a fine little compendium of Schwartz's best poems published in England in 1976, *What Is to Be Given?* (Carcenet New Press), is but 75 pages long and is simply overwhelmed by the ephemera. *Portrait of Delmore* shows us the poet at his most dishevelled, stripped of his defenses and his dignity. Maybe what is lacking is only the ersatz dignity of literary form and verbal composure, but ersatz or real it is vital to the artist who digs deep into himself and mines the seams of his own shame for his art. At such times, one sympathizes with Kafka's plea to Max Brod to destroy all his papers after his death. We're all the richer for Brod's betrayal of his friend, but Schwartz left nothing like *The Trial* behind him when he died.

Delmore Schwartz in all his vanity and turmoil, his narcissism and pain, is growing uncommonly familiar to us these days, while the poetry is sliding out of focus. A generation of readers that knows nothing of Schwartz's great poem "Seurat's Sunday Afternoon Along the Seine" is now expert in his insomnia, his drinking, his rages, and his crackup. There have got to be better forms of homage than these 648 pages of undigested journal. Surely there are shorter ones.

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